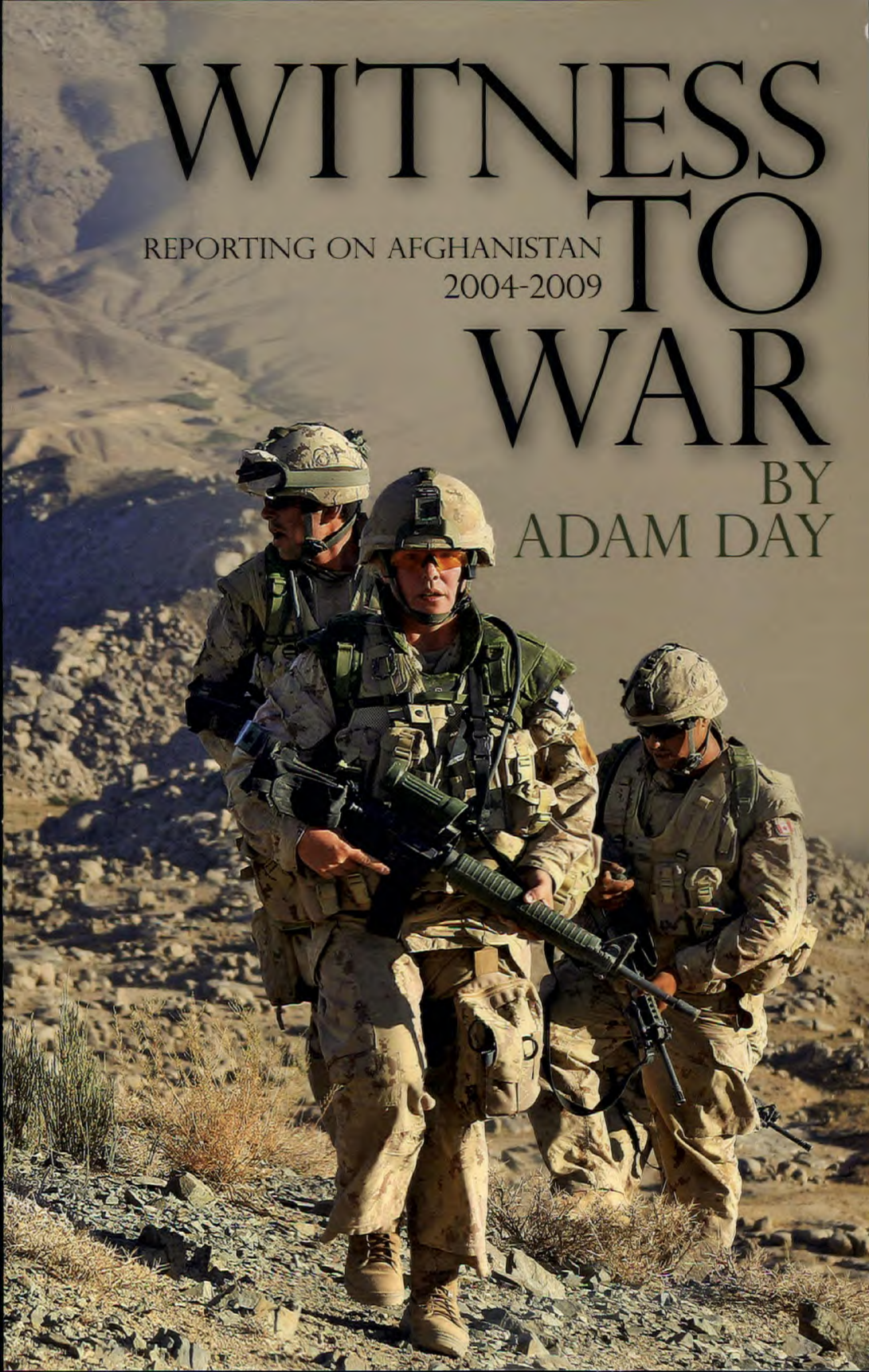
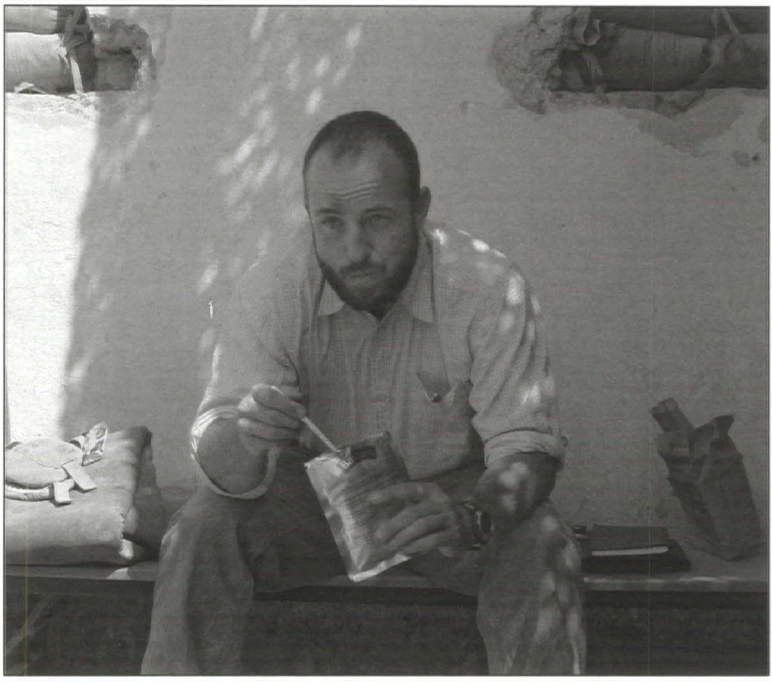
WITNESS TO WAR

REPORTING ON AFGHANISTAN
2004-2009

BY
ADAM DAY





Adam Day, 34, is a Canadian reporter. He studied English at Queen's University and has a bachelor of journalism degree. After three trips to Afghanistan and numerous visits to conflict zones in Africa, the Middle East and the Balkans, he has learned that the value of a comfortable chair is easy to underestimate and that nothing he learned in school prepared him for the first-hand study of protracted low-intensity conflict. Mr. Day lives in Ottawa, Ontario.

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CANADIAN DEFENCE ACADEMY PRESS

By: Adam Day

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The patrols were endless, and also long. Haji Beach, 2008.

INTRODUCTION

THE PROBLEM OF IRREDUCIBLE COMPLEXITY: A MAP OF THE TERRITORY ON A 1:1 SCALE

I think it's some sort of error to carry preconceptions into Afghanistan; but it's the kind of error you don't even realize until it's too late. The place is such a sprawling mess of contrary factors and careening data points that it feels like there's enough evidence to back up almost any theory.

I've been to the country four times – 2004, 2006, 2008 and 2009 – and it's always the same experience: a comprehensive and sometimes jarring process of becoming bewildered. From a distance the situation seems explicable, but the place never fails to torpedo my carefully built opinions – whatever it was I thought I knew going in, whatever I expected to find, none of that stuck together long enough to catch the plane ride out.

Shortly after returning from Kandahar in 2006, my hometown newspaper – *The Port Hope Evening Guide* (now sadly defunct) – wanted to do a little story about the trip. I was interviewed by a reporter I knew well and he kept asking me these big, broad, impossible-to-answer questions: Are we winning? How is troop morale? What's the truth about the war in Afghanistan? I bumbled through the first questions, deflecting them and answering what I could, but it was this last question that stopped me dead. I sat back in my chair and considered what he'd asked. What was 'true' about the war in Afghanistan? As I sat there, everything I thought I knew about Afghanistan and everything I'd seen when I was there just kind of conflated into one long thin distortion. And nothing about the distortion was really communicable. I literally did not know a thing I could say about the place that I would consider 'true'.

I answered something along the lines of "the place is dangerous and complicated." The reporter laughed at me. I was basically speechless. The story was eventually published with the headline "Afghanistan situation 'complicated', reporter says" and it didn't get any better from there. The lead is painful to read now: "'There's no generalization that can be used to describe current happenings in Afghanistan,' says Port Hope native Adam Day who spent September 22 to October 11 in the country to document the efforts of Canadian troops."

My mom called shortly after its publication to make fun of me for being so painfully inarticulate. (I'm not just saying that, she actually did call.)

It's a disconcerting feeling actually. Confronted with a blank page and knowing that the job is to describe the place, the situation – the problem becomes clear: there isn't really enough paper available to do the job.

Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges wrote about something similar in his book *A Universal History of Infamy* wherein he told the story of a fictional land where cartography became so popular that eventually the best maps reached a scale that was exactly the same size as the territory they depicted, so that they literally overlaid the territory itself. "In that empire." Borges wrote, "the craft of cartography attained such perfection that the map of a single province covered the space of an entire city, and the map of the empire itself an entire province. In the course of time, these extensive maps were found somehow wanting, and so the college of cartographers evolved a map of the empire that was of the same scale as the empire and that coincided with it point for point...in the western deserts, tattered fragments of the map are still to be found, sheltering an occasional beast or beggar."

But this apparent irreducibility is a compelling problem, not just for journalists but for commanders and politicians. So frequently commentators seem to be reduced to referring to the 'complexity of the situation'. And it is complex. And not just because words fail, but because the place is a

mess of sprawling factors, each seemingly as important as the other.

Depending on your perspective, the problems in Afghanistan unravel in wildly different ways: It's a problem of governance. It's a problem of insufficient state infrastructure. There are unbridgeable ethnic divisions. Outside of the cities the population is xenophobic and uneducated, tribalized and ungovernable. Pakistan is the problem. Political Islam is the problem. The resolutely un-captured Osama Bin Laden and Mullah Omar are the problem. The terrain is the problem. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) lack of efficiency and resources is the problem. There are (or were) insufficient troops. Bad military strategy has led to a reliance on indirect fire. Opium is the problem, etc, etc.

Books could be written on each of these topics and they would literally comprise a map of the territory on a 1:1 scale. Afghanistan seems to me to be the kind of situation that, if it could be described, the description would be nearly as complex as the situation itself, and therefore of little explanatory value.

And as Lieutenant-General Andrew Leslie told me in 2008, every time he thinks he knows something about Afghanistan or the situation there, he'll travel to Kandahar and be confronted by new and uncategorizable information that basically forces him to reshape his whole conception of the place.

While Afghanistan is a hard place to understand, but it's also hard to escape the short-term vision and thinking that overtake you in a conflict zone, where it's just so difficult to imagine that peace and stability could ever emerge from an operation so sprawling and so seemingly vague.

Before going to Afghanistan for the first time in 2004 I had been to Bosnia. I'd reported on Canadian Forces (CF) operations in Bosnia, I'd toured around Velika Kladusa, Bihac and Zgon, watching Canadians putter around the countryside in their little Iltises before going out for an espresso at the local coffee shop, still clutching their C-7s.

I was quite taken at the time by a book I'd just read called *Empire Lite* by a journalist we now know as a politician, Michael Ignatieff. He'd been to Bosnia too, and he'd used his undeniably big brain to come to some pretty startling conclusions about the place and our mission there. His basic point, which I quoted at length to several dubious but gracious Canadian officers, was that our collective efforts in places like Bosnia and Afghanistan were fatally undermined by our status as outsiders, as strangers in a foreign land who had the vanity to hope we could create the kind of social order and civility we recognize as good.

"Our need for noble victims and happy endings suggests that we are more interested in ourselves than we are in the places like Bosnia that Americans have taken up as causes," wrote Ignatieff in the essay, which first appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* under the title *When a Bridge is Not a Bridge*. "This may be the imperial kernel at the heart of our interest in reconstruction and nation building. For what is empire but the desire to imprint our values on another people? Imperialism is a narcissistic enterprise, and narcissism is doomed to disillusion. Whatever other people want to be, they do not want to be forced to be us. It is an imperial mistake to suppose that we can change their hearts and minds."

It's tempting to read Ignatieff as if he were talking about Afghanistan. Very tempting. But it's also impossible to overlook the fact that the reconstruction and nation-building project in Bosnia does now appear to be historically successful. Canada and NATO have almost entirely ended their involvement in the country and things in Bosnia seem to be going quite well indeed.

While the point made about the dangers of excess pessimism may stand, there are of course a great many differences between the two missions.

In Afghanistan, unlike in Bosnia, the basic effort is not merely to create civil order and reconstruct the country after a war – as if that were easy – but it is no less grand than to create a previously non-existent system of

governance and defeat a virulent, ideological insurgency in a place so ethnically and culturally riven that it seems to be a country made for civil war.

Despite the endless difficulty and complexity, the only appraisal that makes sense to me in early 2010 is that things are simultaneously getting better and worse at the same time. While violence has increased – and seems set to increase further – there are some bright spots too. In 2004, Kabul was a limping, destitute and barely functional city and now it's buzzing with commerce and schoolchildren. In 2006, the main town in Panjwayi – Bazaar-e-Panjwayi – was an insurgent hotbed almost deserted by regular Afghans; now it too is bustling.

If you have the feeling that this introduction is nothing more than a disclaimer, you are right. What follows is definitely not a map of the territory on a 1:1 scale. It is instead a collection of stories written from a fairly specific angle: it is an attempt to document the experience of the Canadian Forces at war.

While many of the stories in the following collection are reproduced here pretty much exactly as they were first published, others, as will be noted, have been expanded or revised with additional material.

Adam Day

A Canadian soldier cleans up some scattered Taliban ordinance in Kabul, 2004.

PART ONE

KABUL 2004:
HYBRID PEACEKEEPING IN A CITY AT THE END OF THE WORLD

No trip to Afghanistan seems complete without some small or not-so-small moments of drama.

Back in 2004 it wasn't so easy for a civilian to fly into Kabul. Few companies were operating on that route and those that were did not inspire confidence at all.

My trip into the country began in Ankara, Turkey where I was working at an English-language newspaper.

After enduring a bizarre interrogation by confused and suspicious officials at the Afghan embassy in Ankara (Why would a Canadian in Turkey need a visa for Afghanistan? What is the 'real' purpose of your trip? Who do you 'really' work for? etc.), I received a kind of eye-widening email from the Canadian Forces: "We can't pick you up at the airport," it said, "You'll have to make your own way from Kabul International to Camp Julien."

But before I made my eventual (and uneventful) cab ride across Kabul, I had to actually make it to Kabul itself.

I boarded the Azerbaijan Airlines Boeing 707 in Ankara and it was clear from the decrepit state of the plane that things could get hitchy. And it didn't take long. We got out on the runway and stopped for the customary spooling of the jet engines, if that is the right phrase, and, as the brakes were released and we were on the very cusp of a jet-powered forward surge, there was a booming series of hyper-sonic cracks from the right rear engine. Loud. So loud. My hair shook is all I feel like I have to say so that you know just how loud. As the booms were shaking the passenger cabin, all of us passengers did a perfectly synchronized series of ducks and weaves, for some reason, instinct I guess, as though it would really matter, our feeble head retractions, in the event of a jet fuel explosion. But anyway, not content to hear the sound of potential catastrophe just the one time, the pilot stopped the plane and repeated the whole scene, once again complete with jet-sized cracks and a unified series of bobs and weaves by the heads of us, the disconcerted passengers.

Anyway, it didn't work, we couldn't take off, and they took us back to the terminal for a wait of many, many hours. Presumably during this time some Turkish man with a wrench was fiddling with the jets, and he must have been successful because we reloaded and took off and this time there was no horrific noise.

After spending a night at an Irish pub inside Azerbaijan's Baku International airport, an ancient Russian Tupolev passenger jet took me the rest of the way to Afghanistan.

So don't believe it if someone tells you there's been no progress in Afghanistan since 2004, because there has been some. Now, a journalist can fly directly from Dubai to Kandahar and while it's definitely true that they're more likely to be

blown up when they get there, at least they'll arrive without being so generally inconvenienced by difficult travel.

After arriving in Kabul, the first thing that struck me was the two huge pictures hanging on the front of the airport. While one was of Afghan leader Hamid Karzai - looking more than a little effete in his elaborate tribal attire – the other, which was at least 6 metres bigger, was of Northern Alliance leader Ahmed Shah Massoud.

In the picture, the hard-eyed Massoud looks dead tough and emblazoned beneath is the inscrutable phrase 'The Great Massoud your way move forward'. What makes it inscrutable, of course, is that Massoud was assassinated by Al-Qaeda just before the attacks of September 11, 2001 and that his mostly Tajik faction is now supposed to be integrated into a general Afghan government under Karzai, a Pashtun.

The mere presence of Massoud's picture at the airport – and throughout the city, in fact – is a telling sign that in 2004 Karzai's power didn't extend even as far the airport façade.

Riding through downtown Kabul in an Iltis.

CHAPTER ONE

PATROLS AND MORE PATROLS: AN OVERVIEW OF EARLY CANADIAN OPERATIONS

In the early days of Rotation (Roto) 0, operations in Kabul didn't seem too much different than peacekeeping in Bosnia. The main effort was presence, patrolling through the city, clearing up after the war and protecting Kabul's outer reaches from any encroaching disorder.

As hard as it is to imagine now, back then newspapers such as the *Globe and Mail* and *National Post* regularly featured 'patrol' stories on their pages. When I arrived in January, in fact, many of the other reporters were bemoaning their new predicament now that their editors had said 'no more patrol stories.'

What follows are a few patrol stories that appeared in newspapers across Canada. While definitely a little low-speed (if not quaint) compared to events in 2006 or 2008, these stories still give some idea of what life was like for soldiers in Kabul before the insurgency began to heat up.

During the early days of the war against the Taliban an American jet screamed across the Afghan sky, attacking and destroying an enemy armoury in southern Kabul.

Now, more than two years later, it's Corporal Mark Kowalkovski's job to go in and remove the unexploded rockets, mortars and missiles that burst out of the armoury when it was flattened.

Kowalkovksi, 27, a native of London and a graduate of H.B. Beal High School, is a member of Task Force Kabul, the Canadian contingent of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) currently deployed in Afghanistan.

By any normal Canadian standard, Kowalkovski has a very dangerous job.

Not only is he in Afghanistan, one of the most dangerous places in the world, he's going to walk out into a debris field littered with live and potentially unstable ordinance in an attempt to make this a safer place for Afghans to live.

And he'll do it with a smile. In fact, Kowalkovski seems to have found a way to have fun in situations of extreme risk. Even as he was picking up delicate 'cluster munitions', Kowalkovski was still smiling and joking with his buddies.

"We're under constant threat here, that's the way we're operating. You come to accept it and you tuck it in the back of your mind and you don't let it bug you because if you do, it'll drive you nuts. This is what we signed up for," said Kowalkovski.

The constant threat caught up with the Canadian soldiers again on Tuesday, January 27, when a suicide bomber attacked an Iltis patrol in southern Kabul, killing Corporal Jamie Murphy and injuring three others.

For eight years Kowalkovski was a member of the London-based 1st Hussars reserve unit but now he's a Royal Canadian Dragoon, which makes him different from the other soldiers in Task Force Kabul, most of whom belong to the Royal Canadian Regiment (RCR).

Kowalkovski came to Afghanistan as an augmentee shortly after two Canadian soldiers, Sergeant Robert Short and Corporal Robbie Beerenfenger, were killed when their Iltis jeep struck a mine just south of Camp Julien, the main Canadian base here, on October 2.

RCR Recce platoon members during a night patrol in Kabul, 2004.

As a result of this attack, the lightly armoured Iltis was given a reduced role in Canadian operations.

"I'm here because I am a qualified Bison driver, and that was the request sent back to Canada, for more crews for armoured personnel carriers. As far as we understood, it was a result of the Canadian deaths," said Kowalkovski.

Once here, Kowalkovski was attached to the explosive ordinance disposal unit, which is how an armoured vehicle driver comes to find himself dodging Taliban bombs on a sunny Monday afternoon in Afghanistan.

According to Sergeant Thompson, leader of this mission to the Taliban armoury, the objective risk out here is "very high."

"This is mostly unfired ordinance and depending on its condition the fuse could be set in a way that stepping on it or moving it could cause it to blow. Of course, there could also be mines out here."

According to Kowalkovski however, the greatest danger he faces in Afghanistan doesn't come from unexploded ordinance, it comes from trying to drive a 13-tonne Bison through Kabul traffic.

"People say the driving is bad here, but you don't really understand it until you've done it. It's almost chaotic, they'll take a four-lane road and turn it into a one-way road. They'll drive into oncoming traffic. It doesn't seem like there's traffic laws out there; there might be, but I'm guessing they've been driving like this forever."

Driving through downtown Kabul is like being on another planet – the disorder on the roads, the great crowds of people just hanging around in the rubble, the medieval smell – this place is several worlds away from Kowalkovski's favourite pubs and restaurants like the Honest Lawyer on Dundas Street.

Though he was excited to come to Afghanistan, Kowalkovski says he's now looking forward to February 26, the date he returns to Canada.

"I miss Tim Horton's. And home-cooked meals. And my wife. Actually I'd better put her on the top of the list."

As for the former Taliban armoury, Kowalkovski and his teammates, despite bringing out several hundred pounds of explosives, couldn't finish the job in one day.

A few days from now, after the suicide-bombing alert has passed, Kowalkovski will be back out there, happily clearing up the deadly remnants of Afghanistan's past.

An Evening with the RCR Recce Platoon

They are stealthy bastards, these soldiers, sliding ahead into the heavy darkness of the alley while I lurch along behind them, floundering in the mud like a witless hog.

But this is no place to fall behind: southern Kabul, deep inside a maze of high walls and narrow alleys, where the air is dense with ash and debris and it couldn't get any darker.

Sometimes there are crowds around us as we walk and some people seem to flee when they see us, but mostly we're alone in these eerie, empty alleys.

Before the patrol began, the squad leader turned to me and said: "You're third in the order of march. If we're attacked from the front, Shakey and I will handle it like we do, and Jay'll take care of you. If we're attacked from the rear, they'll handle it and I'll take you."

I almost got back in the jeep.

Kabul, as you probably know, is full of dangerous people – Al-Qaeda, Taliban, druglords, warlords and, who knows, possibly even Osama himself. And lots of these people would like to harm Canadian soldiers. On Sunday January 25, somebody planted a bomb near a Canadian patrol route, but fortunately it was found and defused in time.

But the soldiers I'm with aren't worried. Quite the opposite, in fact. From their night vision goggles and special shortened C-8 assault rifles with laser sights to their stoicism and refusal to have their names published, these guys are classic hard-charging commando-types.

But there's no element of pretend here, just watching them operate proves that. The way they move forward into the dark, their heads and weapons constantly moving, tracking for targets. My head is constantly moving too, as I totter around slippery sinkholes full of raw sewage.

The three soldiers I'm with are members of the Reconnaissance (RECCE) platoon, Royal Canadian Regiment. These guys are trained to operate covertly behind enemy lines – long missions through the mountains are their specialty, but they also do urban situations like the one we're in now.

When we arrived by jeep into the area of our patrol, the general scene in front of me was so similar to a movie I saw recently that I couldn't resist mentioning it to one of the soldiers.

"Doesn't this remind you of Blackhawk Down?"

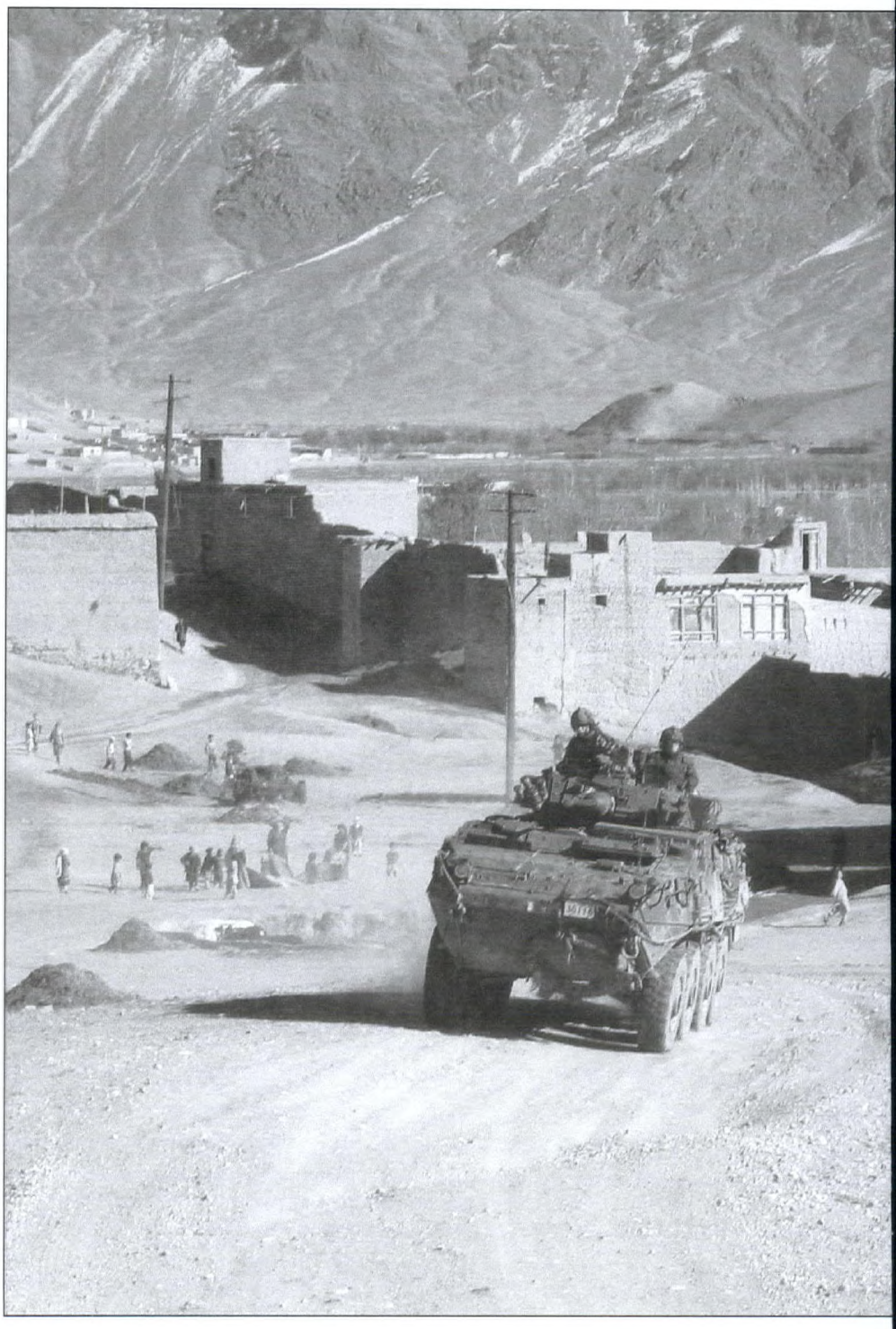
"Don't say that."

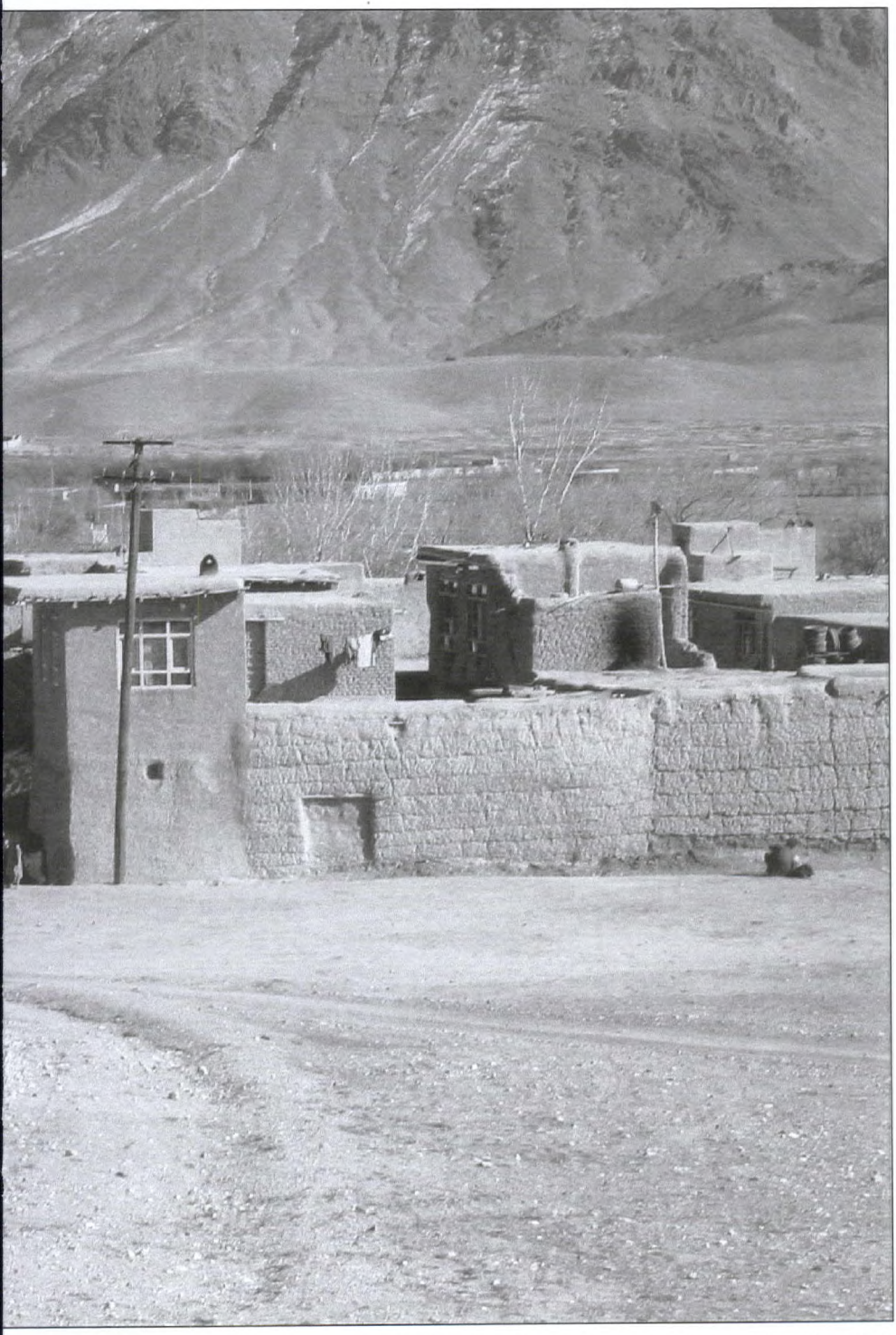
Apparently it didn't remind him of the movie. Or maybe it did, hard to be sure.

But luckily for us (or, rather, unluckily, if you believe the sentiments of the Recce platoon) we made it back to the jeeps without being attacked.

As for me, the stress of going on night operations in a quasi war-zone has given me what I fear is a permanent headache. I think it's time for me to visit the Officer's club and drink until I reach my limit, which is two beers, a rule enforced on anyone residing on the Canadian base in Kabul.

But two beers might not be enough.





Light Armoured Vehicle (LAV) on patrol south of Kabul in the Chahar Asiab valley, 2004

Canadian soldiers pay their respect to Corporal Jamie Murphy. Kabul, 2004.

CHAPTER TWO

JAMIE MURPHY:
THE FIRST CANADIAN SOLDIER KILLED BY A SUICIDE BOMBER

Tuesday started no differently than any other day at Camp Julien. I was up early because I didn't have any patrols or stories lined up and I needed to hustle if I was going to get onto something. After breakfast I wandered by the public affairs office to see what was up, but the place was empty. Strange. I wandered down the company tentlines and it was obvious something was going on: where there were any soldiers standing still, they were talking in hushed tones, but there were few groups at all. There were, oddly enough, a lot of soldiers running to and fro and the Tactical Operations Centre was at the centre of all the running.

I finally found public affairs officer Major Jay Janzen coming out of the National Command Element compound. Normally among the calmest humans I've ever met, Janzen was looking scattered and, most notably, was walking slightly faster than it was possible to walk, which made him look sort of out of control.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"There's been an incident," he said without looking at me. "I have to run."

"Tell me. I'm coming," I said.

"Run with me."

Tuesday was a clear and sunny day in Kabul. There were good views of the snow-covered mountains surrounding the city and the air had a nice crispy bite. For a few moments in the early morning here, Afghanistan didn't seem quite so different from Canada. For the soldiers of the 3rd Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment stationed at Camp Julien, Tuesday was supposed to bring them one step closer to the end of their tours and one day closer to Canada. It brought tragedy instead.

Just over a kilometre from the camp, on a street called Darul Aman, the two-jeep convoy slowed down to navigate a culvert on the road. The soldiers in the convoy were heading across town for a regular weekly meeting with Afghan police officials. The first jeep passed without problem, but as the second Iltis slowed down, a bearded man ran out of the roadside crowd and detonated himself beside the jeep.

Corporal Jamie Brendan Murphy, 26, from Conception Harbour, Newfoundland, was sitting directly behind the driver of the Iltis. He was killed almost instantly by the blast. His remains are being sent back to Canada today, accompanied by some of his friends and fellow soldiers.

Lieutenant Jason Feyko, a native of Peterborough, was sitting in the passenger seat of the Iltis. Reportedly the closest member of the patrol to the bomber, Feyko sustained serious injuries. Though originally brought to Camp Julien for medical attention, he was quickly transferred via a German helicopter for surgery at the more advanced German medical facility across town at Camp Warehouse. Feyko has since been evacuated to Germany. He is expected to recover from his injuries.

Corporal Richard Michael Newman, from Hartland, New Brunswick, and Corporal Jeremy Gerald MacDonald, from Burnt Island, Newfoundland, also sustained injuries in the blast. Both soldiers are currently being treated at medical facilities in Kabul.

One Afghan was also killed in the blast and eight others were injured.

Major John Vass, commander of Parachute Company, was riding in the first Iltis jeep.

Vass remembers slowing down to clear the culvert and "...then, as we were pulling away, I heard this extremely loud explosion. I looked back and noticed their vehicle was all black. It seemed like their radiator had exploded. There was smoke everywhere."

"After we got back there it was quite obvious it was a suicide bomber – two legs were laying beside the Iltis and the guy's torso was across the road," said Vass.

News of the incident spread across Camp Julien in stages. Just after 8:30, when the attack occurred, most of the officers were still in their daily briefings. In one briefing, at the headquarters of Charles Company, a man stuck his head around the corner of a room divider and shouted "There's been an incident." And that's how it began.

The next few hours at Camp Julien were frantic. All across the base, flak-vested and helmeted soldiers were running to their positions, officers were running to briefings and the media were put on communications lock-down.

At around 9:30, when it became clear to the officers assembled in the Tactical Operations Centre that a Canadian had been killed, a brief hush fell across the room. When the chatter resumed, the tone was different, not exactly sombre, more like resolute.

Lieutenant-Colonel Donald Denne, commanding officer of the 3rd Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment came storming into the Tactical Operations Centre at about 10:40. Denne had been at the scene of the attack and he was incensed at what he'd seen. "There's carnage out there the likes of which we don't often see," said Denne.

The reaction to the attack was quick and co-ordinated. Convoys of armoured vehicles were sent out to provide security, snipers from the Reconnaissance platoon were deployed to buildings near the site, and forensic teams combed the scene for clues.

At lunch, the mess hall normally used by the RCR combat soldiers was deserted. Out on the base, the soldiers were sombre. Many were crying. Many were standing in small groups talking in hushed voices.

In the late afternoon the base held a brief gathering to hear from their commander, Major-General Andrew Leslie. The gathering was held in front of the memorial to the two Canadian soldiers who died on October 2, 2003 in a mine attack just south of Camp Julien.

Almost the whole base came out to see Leslie. And as hundreds of troops got down on their knees and formed a semi-circle around him in the gathering dusk, Leslie read out the names of the dead and injured.

These soldiers, most of whom have spent nearly six months in this very dangerous place, all held the same questioning, deeply sad expression as Leslie spoke.

"This incident shows you why we're here," said Leslie. "We're here to protect these people from such animals. This irrational act by one suicide bomber should not poison our relationship with these wonderful people."

"This mission will continue and it's not over by a long shot. NATO will be here for another five to 10 years. We shall not be deterred," said Leslie. "We will not run away."

And they have not been deterred. Patrols have continued, all operations are continuing as planned. Later this week the Canadian soldiers will open a girls' high school they've just rebuilt. Next week they'll open a new bakery. And they'll keep doing it, they'll keep rebuilding Afghanistan

until eventually all their good deeds somehow overcome the evil lurking in the shadows of this place.

Or at least that's the current plan.

On Wednesday morning, with the flags at half-mast and the snow falling hard, Task Force Kabul gathered in front of Corporal Jamie Murphy's casket to say goodbye.

But the day meant for honouring Corporal Murphy quickly turned into another day of mayhem in Kabul.

As the last dignitaries were shuffling into position, a deep explosion boomed in the distance. An announcement confirmed that another suicide bomber had killed another NATO soldier.

A British patrol had been hit by a car bomb just outside their base at Camp Souter, killing one and injuring several others. And near the second Canadian base at Camp Warehouse another explosion had occurred, injuring at least five people.

But the ceremony went on despite the bombs and the heavy snow. It began with a terse speech from Chief Warrant Officer Gapp, Task Force Kabul's regimental sergeant-major.

"We've got some good Canadian weather here to say goodbye to Corporal Murphy. Let's have a good one."

Corporal Don LeBlanc read a eulogy for his friend Corporal Murphy. LeBlanc said Murphy was an excellent buddy and a devoted husband to his common-law wife, Candace. LeBlanc was clearly angered by the nature of the attack, by what he called "... a random act of violence by a man that lacks the value of life that we hold so dearly."

Lieutenant-Colonel Donald Denne, the commanding officer, had the last words on Corporal Murphy. Visibly saddened by the job of saying goodbye to another soldier, Denne said the fallen soldier was "a man driven by a passion to be a great soldier, one who revelled in the opportunities presented to him, one who was well respected by his peers and dedicated to his duty."

As a part of the ceremony for Corporal Murphy, there was to be a large funeral procession down Darul Aman Road to the Kabul International Airport.

However, a few minutes past noon, Camp Julien was placed on high alert and there were rumours of an attack against the base. For the second time in two days the base was locked down – no communications and restricted movement. The heavy snow was also causing problems as, without radar, Kabul International needs clear weather to operate.

The convoy of 14 armoured vehicles waiting to take Murphy's remains to the airport sat for several hours in a line near the front gate waiting for permission to leave.

Finally, after the convoy was shortened to four vehicles and the plane diverted to Bagram airbase outside Kabul, the procession was allowed to leave.

It was a huge convoy – nine vehicles and more than 100 tonnes of Canadian armour carrying over 50 Canadian soldiers, sprinting up Darul Aman Road past the site of Tuesday's deadly attack, north towards downtown Kabul.

This was the first significant Canadian presence in the city since the suicide attacks earlier in the week. When those bombs exploded they triggered a heightened security status and every Canadian driving unarmoured vehicles became stranded wherever they were.

This convoy's mission was to get everyone back to their home base.

The soldiers were tense as the convoy of Canadian armour raced through the ruins of southern Kabul. Private Sam Blake, a rear gunner on one of the vehicles, was watching everything, swinging his big C-9 machine gun around to track potential threats, reporting what he saw over his headset microphone.

Blake, 20, a native of Sudbury and a graduate of Loellen Park Secondary, is a member of Task Force Kabul, the Canadian contingent of the NATO-led ISAF currently deployed in Afghanistan.

When the convoy reached downtown Kabul, however, it wasn't met by suicide bombers, but by normal Afghans. The big train of Canadian vehicles seemed to draw people to the side of the road – young and old alike – they were all smiling and raising their arms, happy to see the Canadians on the streets again.

After a difficult few days it was an encouraging sign for the soldiers. Blake, like many people here, believes most Afghans want NATO and the Canadians to stay in Afghanistan.

"The majority of Afghans seem really friendly and hospitable, always offering you tea and just being really nice. But then you get crazy stuff like what happened yesterday and the day before. These attacks just make me feel like we have a lot more work to do," said Blake.

The Canadian mission here is to provide peace and stability while the new Afghan government is being established. But there are people in Afghanistan who don't want this Canadian peace and they're doing everything they can to ruin the plan. Tuesday's suicide attack against a Canadian patrol – which killed Corporal Jamie Murphy and injured three others – was just the latest example of this resistance.

On October 2nd, Corporal Robbie Beerenfenger and Sergeant Robert Short were killed when their Iltis hit a land mine not far from Camp Julien in southern Kabul, where the majority of Canadian soldiers are based. These attacks have made many soldiers feel like they're perpetually threatened, almost like they're being hunted.

"I don't know how to explain it. It's just a hostile environment. Everywhere you go you have to be alert, because there may be someone trying to kill you," said Blake.

But Blake can see that the Canadian soldiers are making a difference here, and if it were up to him, they would be taking on an even greater role in the stabilization of Afghanistan.

"Kabul really is the safest place in this country. It would be more dangerous without us; we make a big difference. Hopefully our role will be expanded to areas outside Kabul," said Blake.

Despite all the difficulties of life here, Blake is happy to be in Afghanistan. He says that spending five years with the 2912 Sudbury Irish Cadets helped prepare him for military life away from home.

"This is what I've always wanted to do since I was young. So it's hard but it's not that hard. And the base is a lot better than I thought it was going to be. It's amazing how much stuff we have – the mess, the computers, TV – it's awesome," said Blake.

Blake, like most of his comrades in the Royal Canadian Regiment, is due to return to Canada in the next few weeks. The main plan Blake has for homecoming is to get back to Sudbury and have a big dinner with his whole family.

"It's going to be great not having to worry about anything. You don't have to worry about getting killed there. First thing I'm going to do is have a

really long bath and just relax," said Blake.

As it began to get dark in Kabul, the convoy made its last few stops of the day. After picking up the battalion Reconnaissance platoon at Camp Souter, the British base where two soldiers were killed only 24 hours prior, the convoy tore over to the Kabul International Airport to pick up the last of the stranded Canadians.

With this mission completed, the Canadian Forces, and Private Blake, can begin looking forward again towards a time when there are no suicide bombers left in Afghanistan, a time when everyone can feel safe again.

As the Canadian Forces armoured patrol grinds up a dusty hill into a small, mud-walled village, little Afghan girls run alongside, clapping and leaping with joy.

But not everybody is so happy to see the Canadian soldiers here in the Chahar Asiab valley. This is the first day of regular Canadian patrolling since last Tuesday's deadly attacks and Private Ryan Ward is on highest alert – his eyes and huge C-9 machine gun moving constantly, tracking for potential targets.

Ward, 20, a native of Barrie and a graduate of Saint Joseph's High School, is a member of the Royal Canadian Regiment, Task Force Kabul; the Canadian contingent of the NATO-led ISAF currently deployed in Afghanistan.

Surrounded by high, snowy mountains, the Chahar Asiab cuts a wide path through the landscape south of Camp Julien, the Canadian Forces base on the outskirts of Kabul.This valley was the scene of heavy fighting during the last quarter-century of war in Afghanistan. From the wreckage of Russian tanks and attack helicopters to Taliban missile sites destroyed by American bombers, this place and the people who live here have seen more than enough war.

Private Ward and his fellow members of Charles company are here to end the violence and make sure that peace gets a chance in this valley.

Earlier in the tour, before winter arrived, Private Ward came to this village as a part of a project to make life better for the children in the valley.

"We went out and brought a huge load full of coats and clothes. So now you might see a little girl who used to wear just a shirt and shoes out in the cold and now she's got boots and a warm coat. It's good to see that," said Ward.

On 2 October, Corporal Robbie Beerenfenger and Sergeant Robert Short were killed when their Iltis hit a land mine not far from the Chahar Asiab.

Private Ward, who has definitely maintained his sense of humour despite the stress of his job, said that last week's suicide attack represents a new and troubling threat for the Canadian soldiers here.

"When you're out on patrol and you see somebody with a puffy coat, you wonder – is that a suicide bomber or is that a guy with a puffy coat? It really makes you think; you second-guess yourself, and that's not good. I won't say that I'm scared, but it makes you cautious. You can't really prevent a situation like that. That's what terrorism is – it makes you scared," said Ward. Like many of the soldiers here, he has been in Afghanistan for almost six months and is due to return to Canada in the next few weeks.

The recent attacks have only reinforced what a strange and dangerous place Afghanistan is. According to Ward, many of his friends are getting desperate to go home; they're starting to say "This sucks. Get me out of here."

"I miss everything about Canada. Here, before it got cold, it was definitely too hot. It's dusty, nothing's green, everything's brown and desert, the air's dirty, everything's always dirty.

I miss the clean fresh air, green grass, white snow, trees. And there nobody's trying to kill you. I miss that too.

"When I got off the plane and looked around for the first time, the song 'Teenage Wasteland' just started playing through my mind because the whole country is one big wasteland. It looks like an old biblical movie where all the houses are made of mud and people are walking around in dresses; that's the best way I can explain it," said Ward.

Ward is looking forward to seeing his friends and family in Barrie. He says the first thing he's going to do is go to Boston pizza with his family and meet up again with his friends and go out to his favourite bars – the Locker Room and Roosters.

"My friends don't believe I'm in the army. They thought I wasn't going to last ten minutes. They thought I was going to get kicked out or something. Now that I'm here, some of them are scared for me but most of them think it's really cool. There's going to be some parties when I get back to Barrie," said Ward.

Back on patrol in the dusty Chahar Asiab, Ward is eager to stop so we can get out and talk to the local children. But because of the heightened security no Canadian patrols are currently allowed out of their armoured vehicles.

Every few minutes though, the patrol comes across a couple of kids and Ward will lean way out of the hatch to give them a big happy smile. The kids love him; they smile and jump around, yelling at him in Dari, their native language.

Also on the patrol through the Chahar Asian is Corporal Jeremy Ian Blair and he too is on highest alert – his eyes and C-7 assault rifle moving constantly, tracking for potential targets.

Blair, 29, a native of Brampton and a graduate of Bramalea Secondary, is a member of the Royal Canadian Regiment. He has been in the military for more than five years and has been deployed twice before. In 1999, he spent six months in Kosovo, the war-torn southern province of the former Yugoslavia; and in 2002 he went to Alert on Ellesmere Island, the northernmost settlement in the world.

But neither of those places compares to the strangeness of Kabul – a city in ruins, built of mud and scrap metal, with people living among the crashed Russian fighter jets, lawless streets and the medieval smell hanging in the air.

"In Kosovo there were basic amenities and there still seemed to be a social structure; the people are in a much worse position here – there are kids all over the streets, no pants, no shoes, eating rotten food, people drinking water from the sewage creeks at the side of the road, no doors on their shacks, no heat – all sorts of stuff we don't even think about back home."

"But I think we've made a difference here," said Blair. "Given all that's happened you could easily say it's not worth it, but at the same time there's a certain responsibility – Canada has to do this, make this a peaceful place, because it's the right thing to do."

"Jamie was a good friend of mine. It's still hard to believe he's gone – someone you've partied with, spent time with ... It's easy to detach yourself from anything else that happens but when it's a friend of yours it's something you never expect, even considering the job we're in."

Last week's attack troubles the Canadian soldiers here because it represents the emergence of a threat that is difficult to defend against.

"You get awful angry thinking about the suicide bombers. You really can't pick one out, you don't see it coming and you can't go out and stop it from happening. There's nothing we can do to make sure that doesn't happen to somebody else, so you get angry and really frustrated. It's cowardly."

Camp Julien, the main base in Kabul, is like a mini-version of Canada – CBC playing on the television, hamburgers with fries and gravy in the cafeteria, road hockey games, Molson beer – but despite the similarities there's no mistaking Afghanistan for home.

Blair, like many of the soldiers here, has been in Afghanistan for almost six months and is due to return to Canada in the next few weeks.

"As good as we've got it on the base, I miss seeing trees and lakes, grass, clean air – there's none of that around here. I'd much rather be at home where you can walk on the lawn and not be worried about stepping on anything that's going to blow up; you don't have people walking down the roads with weapons, people trying to kill you."

When Blair gets home he's going to go back to Brampton to spend time with his parents, brother and sister and all his old friends.

"I guarantee I'll be going to the Bramalea city centre get the sense of the city again – all the shops, the options, that's the big thing I miss, you can do whatever you want in Canada."

Back on patrol in the dusty Chahar Asiab, Blair says he would like to stop and talk to the local children, but he can't for security reasons.

For Blair and the rest of the Canadians, the recent attacks have only confirmed why they're in Afghanistan – to make this a place where kids don't have to grow up surrounded by tanks and guns and where suicide bombers aren't welcome anymore.

But the attacks are making their job more difficult – instead of stopping and handing out reassuring treats as they did in the past, the patrol roars through the villages of the Chahar Asiab, causing the children's faces to crumple with disappointment.

Despite all the difficulties, however, Blair says he's very happy to have been a part of the mission to Afghanistan, and as much as he wants to go home to Canada, he too is already looking forward to his next deployment, wherever that may be.

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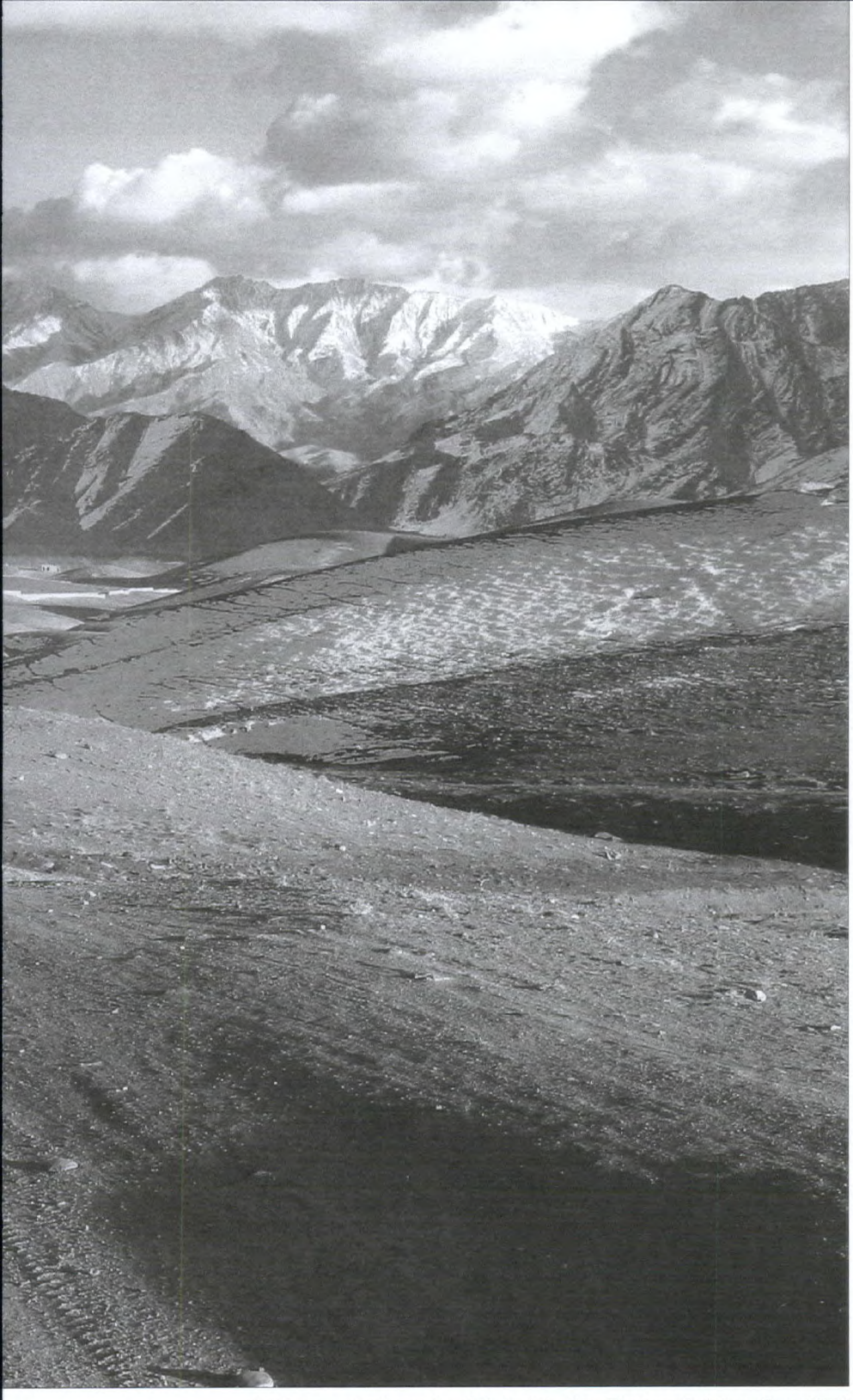


LAV on patrol south of Kabul in the Chahar Asiab valley, 2004

Soldier acting as a rear sentry while on patrol in Kabul, 2004.

CHAPTER THREE

RACING AGAINST CHAOS: EARLY SIGNS OF AN IMPENDING INSURGENCY

In a recent interview with a Canadian officer who served in an important staff position on Roto 0, it became clear that even then the insurgency had begun. While there were reported gunfights with enemy forces during the tour, and no confirmed incidents of direct fire against Canadians by enemy forces, it was apparent that resistance forces had begun to move against NATO.

At the time, of course, it would have been hard to predict the downward spiral that was about to take NATO and Canada deep into a protracted and bloody insurgency, but there were still a few signs.

The following article was published in the Turkish Daily News in late February, 2004.

Racing Against Chaos: An Update on NATO's Operation in the Imperial Graveyard

The descent into Kabul is a foreboding sample of the lawless, warland atmosphere of the country itself – the ancient Russian Tupolev jet banks hard left and down to clear the high sharp mountains encircling the city, the plane shakes its way through the cloud cover, misses a craggy ridge-line by a metre and screams across the mud rooftops toward Kabul International, low and fast to avoid ground fire.

A hard landing doesn't diminish this sense of unease. The runway is lined with row upon row of dead Russian military equipment – Hind helicopter gunships lay twisted among the tanks, transport planes and MIG fighter jets – a rusting memorial to a now-dead superpower.

The Russians arrived in Afghanistan in 1979 to provide security for an unpopular government they'd recently helped into power. Their imperial adventure ended in 1989, after a decade of grinding guerrilla warfare. The Soviet Union collapsed soon after.

In a line near the terminal are jets and helicopters belonging to NATO, the new power in Kabul. Eerily, much of the equipment – Bulgarian Hinds and Ukrainian MIGs – are the same make and model as the stuff now living in the graveyard. But there are also German, Canadian and British aircraft here now too.

Afghanistan, it should be noted, has a long history of successfully repelling invaders. In addition to the Soviet Union, Afghan guerrillas defeated the British twice, spectacularly in 1842 and with less of a fight in 1919. No other country boasts such a record of defeating imperial superpowers.

Now British soldiers are once again patrolling the streets of Kabul, as a part of the NATO ISAF. After just over two years, NATO has managed to gain control of Kabul, but the cities and provinces in the rest of Afghanistan remain insecure.

Billions of dollars in international money have come into Afghanistan, and so have the aid agencies. The streets are crowded with gleaming white Toyota Land Cruisers ferrying many different international non-governmental organizations.

But the United Nations (UN), for one, is having increasing problems with security. During the last four months, six of its employees have been killed and many more wounded, prompting a UN withdrawal from much of the south and east and a comment by Secretary General Kofi Annan that "... we may lose Afghanistan."

The insurgency in the south, especially around Kandahar, is becoming more organized and more deadly – over 350 have been killed in attacks during recent month.

Kabul has not been spared the violence either. In January, consecutive suicide bombings against Canadian and British forces caused dozens of casualties, including Jonathan Kitulagoda, 23, a private in the Territorial Army from the Rifle Volunteers E (Devon and Dorset) Company. Kitulagoda died on January 28 in an attack less than a mile from Camp Souter, the British base in Kabul.

In response to these attacks, NATO has stepped up its 'direct-action' missions against the insurgents and Taliban remnants. These missions, while necessary to protect the soldiers, effectively blur the line between peacekeeping and combat. For the ordinary Afghan on the ground in Kabul, seeing soldiers tearing around in tanks in the dead of night, breaking down doors and hauling suspects away brings back memories of the Soviet era.

"These attacks, at night, this is what the Russians did too. After they started with this, everything got worse," said Abdur Karmal, a NATO translator.

In order for NATO to succeed in Afghanistan, a whole generation of warlords and fighters need to be divested of their interests, centuries-old ethnic divisions need to be mended, a country consisting mainly of semi-destroyed mud huts needs to be rebuilt, and it needs to be proven to every member of a population accustomed to violence and coercion that our way, democratic capitalism, is really their best option.

While the money's still flowing and the planes are still dropping loads of supplies, it might be hard for the Taliban to make any serious progress into the NATO area of operations. But several NATO countries are already losing interest in Afghanistan – they are looking toward Iraq – and if the troops and money and the supplies dry up then, as one Canadian soldier said, "...this is a violent gun culture; if they decide they want us out it won't be pretty."

A LAV kicks up a dust storm on Camp Julien, Kabul 2004.

So the whole mission in Afghanistan comes down to a race between dwindling resources and the construction of a nation, a race between NATO's ability to build a central government with an army and security force strong enough to restore national order and diminishing interest from Western sponsor governments.

One of the greatest challenges facing NATO in the coming years will be to recognize the moment of victory, or conversely, the moment of failure. Either way, leaving military forces engaged in far-off lands with weak domestic support is a recipe for certain disaster. This is especially true in Afghanistan – if the majority of people here, for whatever reason, decide they no longer support the NATO presence, the mission will quickly become very ugly and very costly.

According to no less an authority than history itself, the trick to winning in Afghanistan may not be the invasion or the occupation, but clear parameters for a well-timed withdrawal.

A LAV on patrol south of Kabul in the Chahar Asiab valley, 2004.

PART TWO

KANDAHAR, 2006:
BLAZING FULL SPECTRUM OPS IN THE BATTLE FOR PANJWAYI

Travelling to Afghanistan alone and sometimes underfunded is not for the faint of heart.

In 2006, eager to avoid the chaotic taxi stand I'd survived in 2004, I made arrangements with two different hotels and one transport service to have a representative meet me at the airport.

Of course, none came and I was left to find my own ride.

I stood just inside the bank of glass doors at the Kabul international airport looking wistfully around the lobby. There were no kind-looking drivers holding a sign with my name on it. I looked outside. Unlike the non-violent chaos of 2004, the front of the airport looked now like the war zone it was; troops from several different NATO countries lingered beside their armoured vehicles, manned bunkers and heavy machine guns. Each of them – Germans, Danes, English – had the kind of harassed and vaguely unhappy expression most rational people have on their faces when they could be blown up at any second.

Interestingly, it was the presence of so many foreign soldiers that led to my most positive impression of 2006. As I write below in the story about the operations of Civil-Military Co-operation (CIMIC), the coalition nature of the effort did seem to indicate some historical progress.

"But there is a larger picture too," the story goes. "If you hang out on any big ISAF base in Afghanistan you'll see soldiers from many countries – Germans, Austrians, Estonians, Latvians, Macedonians, Italians, Croatians and Czechs – and they're all working together, fighting together in many cases, to prevent the resurgence of a kind of totalitarian thinking that we've all agreed is the enemy, a kind of thinking that doesn't belong in the future.

"If one thing is clear in Afghanistan, it's that the world has come a long way since the early part of the 20th century. It wasn't too long ago that many of the countries here were fighting world wars to prevent this same kind of thinking from taking over. Now, that fight is largely over and there aren't many bad guys left. The few that do remain are trapped in the world's dusty corners, hiding in mountain caves or living disguised among the villagers. It's a tough battle, it won't be quick and victory isn't guaranteed, but NATO is clearing them out. Canadians are leading the fight."

However, that said, when I eventually left Afghanistan in 2006, it was with the overwhelming suspicion that Canada had gone deep into a military effort that America was fundamentally unserious about.

The white schoolhouse burns on Objective Rugby. September 3, 2006. (Photo courtesy Charles Company)

Chapter Four

OPERATION MEDUSA: THE CHARGE OF CHARLES COMPANY

When I arrived at 3 in late September 2006, Operation Medusa had been over for a few weeks but it was still the talk of the Forward Operating Base (FOB). I met countless soldiers who told me stories about the battles and the heroism and the screw-ups and I made, then and there, an entry into my notebook that read, simply: "Medusa is a story to be told."

After coming back from Kandahar I worked on a series of stories about my trip, but never forgetting my intention to work on Medusa. In late February, the then Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) General Rick Hillier gave a speech that touched on Medusa and once again ignited my desire to tell the story. I made the first phone calls shortly after.

This is what General Hillier said:

"Let me just tell you a little story. Charles Company, 1st Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment, Labour Day weekend. Matt Sprague, Company Commander, Sergeant-Major Barnes, Company Sergeant-Major. On that terrible weekend they lost a company commander in action, lost a company sergeant-major, lost one out of three platoon commanders, lost all three platoon warrant officers, one wounded, two killed, lost five section commanders out of nine and lost all of the section's second-in-command master corporals – a total of 40-plus wounded and five killed in a 48-hour period. They stepped up. A young sergeant promoted to sergeant last July became the company sergeant-major. Young master corporals became a platoon commander and platoon second-in-commands. And young soldiers became section commanders and they carried on the operation and the fight against the Taliban that gave NATO such an incredible boost right at the start of that mission. Now if that's not a Canadian epic that will come out in the telling, I don't know what is. And I think it just tells us yet again what incredible people we have in places like Charles Company, the 1st Battalion, the Royal Canadian Regiment."

The following stories appeared in Legion Magazine.

Operation Medusa: The Charge of Charles Company

Within sight of the infamous white schoolhouse, epicentre of the insurgency in Kandahar province, the hastily assembled Canadian force entered the kill zone. An enemy signal flare shot up across Charles Company's lead elements and there aren't many polite words to describe what happened next.

Rick Nolan died. 7 Platoon's warrant officer, its heart and soul, was sitting in the passenger seat of a lightly armoured G-Wagon when a rocket-propelled grenade came crashing through the windshield. Sitting in the back seat were a medic and an Afghan interpreter, both badly wounded.

Corporal Sean Teal, dazed but mostly unhurt, jumped into a hail of bullets and went to find help. The G-Wagon never moved again.

Shane Stachnik died. The engineer sergeant was standing in his armoured vehicle's air sentry hatch when an 82 mm recoilless rifle round blew them apart. Most inside were wounded or unconscious and the vehicle went radio silent. Call sign Echo 3-2 was out of the fight.

The enemy were hidden in their trenches and fortified buildings, firing from three sides. The Canadians were enveloped. Bullets kicked up dirt cinematically. Rockets screamed in. Every Canadian gun that could still fire blasted away at the muzzle flashes in the distance.

A Canadian armoured vehicle, full of wounded and dead, reversed at high speed out of the kill zone only to crash backwards into a ditch where it was hit by several rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs). Call sign 3-1 Bravo was stuck and dying. It never left the ditch.

The radios were full of screaming voices, some calling for medics, some just looking for help. As the firing and explosions continued, many soldiers began helping their wounded friends, focusing on their own rescue mission, fighting their own war. Time got all messed up. It went too fast or it went too slow; hours seemed like minutes and some seconds took forever. Wounded men crawled across the ground looking for cover. Everywhere there were acts of unimaginable courage.

Yet more would die. Private William Cushley, legendary joker, friend to seemingly everybody, was killed alongside 8 Platoon's warrant officer Frank Mellish, who came forward to see if he could help after he heard his friend Nolan was in trouble.

It went on and on for hours. An officer sprinted across open ground armed now only with his pistol, looking for his comrade. The enemy kept firing. The company sergeant-major went down.

They fought through one calamity after another. And the wounded piled up. Some were hit more than once. Others were wounded in ways that couldn't be seen.

Through it all the calm voice of Charles' commander, Major Matthew Sprague, himself under fire, came over the net directing his men through the chaos, calling in air strikes and artillery. But the enemy was dug in too deep and hidden too well. They poured unrelenting, if poorly aimed, fire on the trapped Canadian force.

When an errant 1,000 pound bomb, dropped off-target by a coalition aircraft, came bouncing through the Canadian lines and ended up right in front of them, there was little left to do but retreat.

Captain Derek Wessan radioed Sprague at call sign 3-9er. "We've gotta get the f-k out of here," he said. "And then we've gotta blow this place up."

Of the 50 or so Canadian soldiers that went into the kill zone that day, no fewer than 10 were wounded, four were killed and at least six became stress casualties.

Even now, even with a year's worth of hindsight, it's still hard for any one person to say exactly what happened that day.

What's known for sure is that five soldiers in that fight received Canada's third highest award for bravery – the Medal of Military Valour while another, Corporal Sean Teal, received the Star of Military Valour – Canada's second highest award, just beneath the Victoria Cross. One other soldier was mentioned in dispatches.

The ambush at the white schoolhouse took place on September 3, 2006, on the second day of Operation Medusa, NATO's first-ever ground combat operation, and Canada's largest combat operation since the Korean War.

That it was a huge battle fought heroically against long odds is clear. But what's less well known are the controversial circumstances that prefigured the battle. This was a struggle that saw a general's strategic instinct – his feel for the shape of the battle – lead him to abandon a carefully laid plan and overrule his tactical commanders in the field in order to send Charles Company on a hastily conceived and ultimately harrowing attack against a numerically superior enemy in a well-established defensive position.

That story, and more, will be detailed here, in Legion Magazine's three-part report on the Battle of Panjwayi, which begins with the background to Operation Medusa and the behind-the-scenes controversy that shaped the deadly September 3rd attack.

Operation Medusa was the largest operation in Afghanistan since 2002 and it was intended to disperse or destroy the hundreds, if not thousands, of insurgents that had gathered about 20 kilometres southwest of Kandahar city, in a district called Panjwayi.

In 2006, Panjwayi was the insurgency's simmering heartland. For a whole generation of Canadian service members, the mention of Panjwayi will almost certainly conjure hard memories of small villages and complex defensive terrain, intractable hostility and endless roadside bombs. Of the 66 Canadians killed in Afghanistan since 2002 (as of July 10, 2007), almost half died in Panjwayi.

Panjwayi is the spiritual and literal home of the Taliban movement. It's the birthplace of their as-yet-unaccounted-for leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, and the place where the movement began in the mid-1990s.

The district is centred on the Arghandab River and the town of Bazaar-e-Panjwayi. Bordered on the south by desert, Panjwayi is dominated by a few massive, singular mountains – Masum Ghar and Mar Ghar.

Since the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, Kandahar province had been mostly an American responsibility. When the Canadian battle group moved south from Kabul to Kandahar in early 2006, they discovered quickly that Taliban activity was high, and that it was centred in Panjwayi.

Throughout the first six months of the new mission, the first rotation – largely comprised of soldiers from the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI) – routinely fought insurgents in and around Panjwayi.

Operation Medusa was meant to change all that. It was going to be a decisive victory in the Battle of Panjwayi.

Brigadier-General David Fraser controlled Medusa from his headquarters at Kandahar airfield, the sprawling coalition base just outside Kandahar city. Fraser was not only Canada's highest-ranking man on the ground, but he was also NATO's commander in southern Afghanistan.

Out in the field, the battle group was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Omer Lavoie, the tough-talking commander of the 1st Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment, a man described by several of his men as a soldier's soldier. The Canadian component of his force was comprised of 1 RCR, a complement of 2 Combat Engineer Regiment, 2 Royal Canadian Horse Artillery, medics from 2 Field Ambulance and various support staff, for a total of about 1,050 Canadians.

While trouble had been brewing in Panjwayi for some time, when Lavoie and his RCR battle group arrived in Kandahar in early August 2006, just as NATO was taking command from the Americans in the south, the situation there reached a critical point. Expecting to conduct a counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan, Lavoie was surprised to discover that a threatening number of enemy fighters had gathered just outside Kandahar city. "We took over right on the threshold of the transition to NATO," said Lavoie. "So I think the Taliban decided that they would either test us or show that NATO didn't have the resolve to conduct combat operations to

the extent that U.S. forces did."

Within hours of the August 19 ceremony that marked his assumption of command over the Canadian battle group, Lavoie got a first-hand look at the real situation in Panjwayi.

A few days before, Lavoie had ordered a small company-sized force to go camp out on the high point of Masum Ghar and observe the area for enemy activity.

Three hours after taking command, at about 7:00 p.m., Lavoie received a message that between 300 and 500 insurgents were attacking his force out at Masum Ghar. "What happened, of course, was the Taliban, seeing our vehicles up on our hill and not liking the idea, decided to launch a fairly significant attack," said Lavoie. "I finally got forward to the position at about 4:00 a.m. In the end we killed about 100 Taliban and took no friendly casualties, so it was a good way to start off.

"But the significance of that was that it sent a very strong message to us, and by extension NATO, that if they could mass that size of an attack there was a significantly greater proportion of enemy in that area than was anticipated, based on what our predecessors had noted; so that battle of Panjwayi on August 19 was the precursor to Medusa."

"Almost immediately I was called back to the brigade commander (Fraser) and given a warning order to anticipate having to conduct a major combat operation in the Panjwayi area to defeat and push this sizable enemy element out – so Medusa started from my perspective right at that time."

Back in Kandahar, Fraser, too, noted the shift in Taliban tactics.

"We also found out the Taliban had changed their tactics. They went from small group hit-and-run to conventional come-and-get-me. Their intent was to prove to the world and the Karzai government that they could

take us on. It was the culmination of their 2006 idea, I won't even say campaign plan. It was their idea of how they wanted to finish off the fighting that year, and finish off the fighting in total. They thought they could win it then.

"What they underestimated was that I was onto their plan, I knew what their intent was," said Fraser. "I had determined they wanted me to attack them head on, à la World War I, at enormous cost in soldiers, both Afghan and coalition. But I would not accept that as an acceptable course of operation.

"So we adapted and wrote a plan to counter their intent, designed to mitigate collateral damage to Afghans and their fields and their huts, and also to mitigate the threat to my soldiers, both Afghan and coalition.

"We circled the wagons, so to speak, around the Taliban, and forced them to pop their head up so we could lop it off."

The plan for Medusa was big and seemed quite solid. In total, there would be almost 1,400 coalition soldiers on the ground with the battle group and thousands more supporting them. According to Fraser, he spent much of August working up the plan.

"This was a big effort from a brigade point of view; I pulled in troops from my entire brigade, which comprised nine nations across four provinces, down into Panjwayi because the Taliban were not going to win. I was very firm. I said, 'You've taken on the wrong guy if you want to take on Dave Fraser, 'cause I'm going to beat you here.'"

On the ground, there were several distinct forces ready to close on the enemy. Lavoie's Canadian force was Charles Company in the south, coming through Bazaar-e-Panjwayi, with Bravo Company in the north, fighting southward. On one flank was Task Force 31, comprised of

coalition – mainly U.S. – Special Forces and also Task Force Grizzly, an American company. With a Danish squad in position to the west and a Dutch Company patrolling the perimeter to the north, the enemy were pretty much surrounded.

Operation Medusa began at first light on September 2 with an attack on two axes, with the main effort being in the south. There, Sprague and Charles Company, in the main, were to seize the high features around Panjwayi – Masum Ghar and Mar Ghar – and isolate the town of Panjwayi itself. They would advance right up to the south bank of the Arghandab River, but not across.

"At 5:30 a.m., we moved out. The entire operation was based on my H-hour, which I had chosen as 6:00 a.m. – that being the time at which I intended to launch my forces to secure Masum Ghar," said Sprague. "As it turned out, at 6:00 a.m. sharp we had secured Masum Ghar. By 6:15 a.m. I had declared no pattern of life across the river in Pashmul, save for groups of insurgents with whom we began to trade fire."

According to the original plan, having seized the high points around Panjwayi and to the north, the battle group would take the next several days to batter the Taliban – who were now trapped in a fairly small area, perhaps five square kilometres – into submission.

However, that carefully prepared plan began to change almost immediately.

"In the original brigade instruction, once I had confirmed that there were no civilians present, a pre-arranged air strike using precision-guided munitions was supposed to simultaneously hit between 10 and 20 known insurgent command and control nodes," said Sprague. "For whatever reason, this didn't happen and the strike was cancelled by the brigade."

Nonetheless, on both high points, the Canadians set up firing lines of armoured vehicles and proceeded to blast away at targets of opportunity

across the river throughout the morning and afternoon of September 2.

"The intent then," said Lavoie, "once that area was seized and the enemy was hemmed in from the north and the south, was to continue to engage the enemy for the next three days with primarily offensive air support but artillery and direct fire as well, in order to, from my perspective, determine where the enemy actually was, and to degrade the enemy's ability to fight before we actually committed the main force into the attack."

And it was quite a place to attack. If Kandahar is the strategic centre of Afghanistan, and the Panjwayi district is the key to Kandahar, then the area around the town of Bazaar-e-Panjwayi, which includes the small village of Pashmul, is at the very heart of the whole situation.

This, roughly speaking, was Objective Rugby – the area just across the Arghandab River, centred on the white schoolhouse, where Charles Company would cross the river to be ambushed in just a few hours.

Objective Rugby was a place the Canadians knew well. On August 3, 2006, the PPCLI was involved in a hellish battle at the white schoolhouse that led to the deaths of four soldiers – Sergeant Vaughn Ingram, Corporal Christopher Jonathan Reid, Corporal Bryce Jeffrey Keller and Private Kevin Dallaire – with six more wounded. Also for actions taken during that fight, Sergeant Patrick Tower was awarded the first Canadian Star of Military Valour.

"This was the ground the enemy had chosen to defend," said Fraser, who, having been in command on August 3, just one month prior, was well aware of what happened that day. "Rugby was where we assessed that the Taliban wanted us to fight them on. That was their main battleground. Their whole defence was structured to have us coming across the Arghandab River in the south and fight into Rugby. And the schoolhouse was the area in the centre, where there were big killing fields to the east and the north."

In the early hours of September 3, 2006, the area across the Arghandab gets pounded.

(Photo courtesy Charles Company)

Given the recent history of Objective Rugby, and the evident build-up of enemy forces in the area, the battle group was looking forward to taking their time before going across into Taliban territory. According to the plan, they had lots of time.

"There were a series of deceptions and feints planned in those three days to cause the enemy to react," said Lavoie, "so that we would be able to see where he was so we could plan the final attack."

But this was not to happen. The plan was about to change.

At about 2 p.m. on September 2, Fraser visited Masum Ghar to check out the situation. At that point, insurgent activity had tapered off.

Seeing this, Fraser gave the order to cross the Arghandab. While many of the guys on the ground were wary of heading off into enemy territory with so little preparation, shortly after, as ordered, Sprague led 7 Platoon and an engineer detachment out into the riverbed to map out the crossing.

The order then came down to leave 7 Platoon camped in the riverbed for the night. This was duly arranged, and the platoon began to hunker down. However, a short time later a conference of senior leaders at Masum Ghar decided there was no tactical advantage to leaving the platoon dangling out on the edge of enemy territory, and they were pulled back just as darkness fell.

At about midnight, Lavoie was again ordered by Fraser to launch an attack across the river.

To the guys on the ground, this order made even less sense. But for Lavoie,

The insurgents were dug in deep.

(Photo courtesy Charles Company)

managing to get that order postponed was no small feat. According to several sources, the conversation about whether it was a good idea to launch a spur-of-the-moment midnight attack into what was probably one of the most heavily defended hostile positions in Afghanistan did become quite animated.

Lavoie got on the radio and told Fraser that to cross now was not a good idea. It was too risky. They didn't know the river's flow rate or its depth, nor were any fording sites marked. And they had little intelligence on enemy positions.

While Lavoie's stand earned him the undying respect of his soldiers, it was not an easy thing to do.

"(Lavoie) and I had some pretty serious discussions, because we were talking about the hardest fight either one of us had ever done in our military career," said Fraser. "So the fact that we could have a frank and open discussion attests to the level of trust and co-operation we had, that we weren't afraid to speak our minds. And you need that, because as commanders we're dealing with lives of soldiers, and lives of Afghans. We were talking about the big step of going across the river, metaphorically and literally, to finish off the Taliban."

Nonetheless, this argument was merely to get the midnight attack postponed. The orders were now to attack at first light on September 3, still a full 48 hours earlier than planned and without the promised bombardment.

Several questions remain to this day for the soldiers who had to follow these orders, but they can all be reduced to this: Why abandon the plan and bring forward the attack?

Indeed, it's hard to see what caused the need to hurry – the Taliban were trapped and surrounded; it was now just a matter of lopping their heads off.

As Fraser himself notes, the very heart of the Taliban strategy was to draw them into costly ground conflict.

As one RCR officer said, it's not like they were racing to save Ottawa from an invading force. "What's the rush?" said another RCR officer. "We know where they are, it's a free-fire zone."

There was, in fact, no rush. Though Fraser agrees there was pressure from above to get things moving, he says that wasn't a real factor.

"There was pressure from every quarter. I told people above me that we were going to play this the way we intended to play this. It was gonna take time, and it took a long time."

Instead, the decision to bring the attack forward was based, in large part, on Fraser's appraisal that the enemy had weakened and was ready to be exploited.

"So, the intelligence I was receiving, and also the information I was receiving from my other task force commanders that were part of this battle, not just Omer Lavoie, and talking to Afghans: we were ready. We were at the point where we could press this thing home. Yeah, we could have stuck to the plan, but, again, you start to ignore the enemy, what he's doing, what intelligence is on the ground."

"You fight the enemy guided by a plan. You don't fight a plan. If you fight a plan and ignore the enemy, you will fail. You will incur lots of casualties and you will fail. A plan only gets you thinking and gets you to meet the enemy. And the enemy has a vote. So, on September 1st or 2nd, I had decided the situation was changing so that we could attack. I gave (Lavoie) the orders on the 2nd to attack. It was in advance of what the plan said. Well, I don't care about the plan."

Despite the fact, made apparent the next morning, that Fraser's appraisal of the situation turned out to be demonstrably optimistic, the bottom line for the general was that he believed there was nothing to be gained by 48 hours of additional bombardment.

"Well, I listened to what they had to say," he said of his cautious tactical commanders. "I knew a lot of enemy were there. But, you know, you do two more days of bombardment, how many do you kill? How do you know that? You guess."

"No matter if you went in on the 2nd, the 3rd, 4th, 5th or 6th. Guess what ladies and gentlemen? It is a difficult thing to cross a river and to go into a main defensive area where the Taliban were waiting and wanted to fight on. It would have been gut-wrenching, whatever day was picked to go across that river."

Gut-wrenching it may have been, but according to the soldiers who did it, it would have been a much different event if they had stuck to the original plan. As Sprague notes, the extra time would have given the Canadians several major advantages in addition to reducing or destroying the buildings that were to give the Taliban such excellent cover and concealment.

"We could have used that time to conduct feints, force the insurgents into reacting to our manoeuvre. We could have used our manoeuvre to draw them out into positions where our firepower could have decimated them and, at the very least, we could have seen their reactions to our movement."

"The old adage is 'Time spent in recce (reconnaissance) is seldom wasted.' We never got to do a recce. Therefore, we never had a tactical plan because we never had time to make one."

Despite the arguments of his tactical commanders, Fraser would not be deterred.

"The decision was 'We're gonna go in' and 26 years of experience in seven different operations told me now was the time to go in there and finish this thing off."

In the end, of course, the only thing that was very nearly finished off was Charles Company.

As for Lavoie, he'd made his stand, but orders were orders, and, one way or another, the attack was going on.

"He's my commander," noted Lavoie diplomatically. "And I guess, in his mind, he thought that was the course of action to follow."

At first light the next morning, September 3, Sprague gathered his platoon leaders and supporting officers for hasty orders. With less than 15 minutes to make a plan, what was said didn't amount to much more than 'We're going across. Follow me.' It was to be an old-fashioned WW I-style assault into the guns, albeit on a smaller scale. It was the charge of Charles Company.

So, with little if any battle procedure, no reconnaissance and intelligence that was either insufficient or wildly wrong, Sprague led his force down the bank and into the river. This was Canada's first company-sized mechanized combined arms attack on a fixed position since Korea, at the heart of NATO's first-ever battle, and it was like nothing they'd ever trained to do. It was rushed and it was risky – doctrine was out the window.

Across the river and onto the far bank, the engineers made their breaches and Charles crawled up into the fields beyond.

They moved into enemy territory, unaware of what was about to happen.

Everything was quiet. It was all to come.

CHAPTER FIVE
OPERATION MEDUSA: DEATH IN A FREE-FIRE ZONE

Having just been blown up, Corporal Richard Furoy lay on the hard Afghan earth bleeding, in untold kinds of pain and probably close to shock. Beside him lay the body of his friend, Warrant Officer Rick Nolan. Enemy rounds were tearing up the ground and cracking past, slapping into the burning G-Wagon from which Furoy had just escaped.

The only Canadian soldier Furoy could see was Corporal Sean Teal, who was frantically fighting off the enemy, who were just there – in the distance – bobbing and weaving in the high marijuana fields near the white schoolhouse, firing fat waves of bullets at the Canadians.

Furoy was the 7 Platoon medic, seconded to Charles Company from 2 Field Ambulance. When he arrived, Nolan had taken him under his wing, shown him how to get by. Now Nolan was dead and Furoy couldn't have done anything about it and the situation was beyond horrible.

Corporal Richard Furoy (right) and Private William Cushley just before Operation Medusa. 2006.

(Photo courtesy Charles Company)

Over on the right flank of the Canadian advance, Sergeant Shane Stachnik was already dead and the attack was quickly turning into a self-rescue mission. Furoy kept thinking about his friend. In the midst of battle, he leaned over and squeezed Nolan's arm. 'Sorry brother, sorry,' he said.

Teal and Furoy were alone and their communications were down. Furoy

was slipping in and out of awareness. He figured maybe he was finished. His feet felt like they were on fire, and his face was wet with blood. He passed out. But Teal was not letting him go; he brought him back to his senses with the butt of his rifle.

Teal placed Nolan's C-8 rifle in Furoy's hands and said, "Enemy 50 metres to the front, defend yourself." Furoy did.

Suddenly help arrived. In the maelstrom, Teal had managed to signal the nearest LAV, call sign 3-1 Charlie, that he needed help. Sergeant Scott Fawcett grabbed two soldiers – Corporal Jason Funnel and Private Michael Patrick O'Rourke – and took off running through the marijuana fields.

Furoy, still lying on the ground, looked up at Funnel and saw tracers flying by his friend's face, rockets flying just overhead. Surely Funnel would die any second, thought Furoy.

Later, Funnel would say he thought the same thing about Furoy, as he watched bullets plow into the dirt around the wounded medic.

They've been to war, these Canadian soldiers, the veterans of Panjwayi; they've been to a place beyond the normal world. They've seen their friends lying wounded on the ground, seen them die. And they've seen their own death: it was right there, in the rockets flying by – the end of everything. It's a place without illusions; a place where fear and courage are the same thing: live or die, you do your duty or you don't. It's a place from which any return is difficult.

Don't feel sorry for them; they don't want that. They are professional warriors and the first thing the men of Charles Company want you to know about the battle for Objective Rugby is that they didn't lose. Not on the day. Not on the mission. The attack failed and it was bloody chaos. Yes. But the task force kicked a mighty amount of Taliban ass that day. The enemy were lined up and hidden, hundreds of them, firing from three sides. And

the Canadians went forward, despite it all; they faced up and went into the guns, into the rockets; they attacked.

Charles Company of The Royal Canadian Regiment is the most decorated, most bloodied company in the serving Canadian Forces. By the end of this story the unit will be worse than decimated, but even that's not the end of it. Without exception, these men protect their memories fiercely – and they don't tell stories lightly – but they want you to know what they did, what they fought against.

Here is what happened:

It was September 3, 2006, the second day of Operation Medusa and Charles Company was leading a hasty attack straight up the middle onto Objective Rugby, a small plot of heavily defended land in the middle of Panjwayi district, Kandahar province, Afghanistan.

While this is primarily the story of Charles Company on September 3 and 4, it should be known that Medusa was a huge operation – NATO's first-ever ground combat assault and the biggest Canadian-led battle in more than half a century. The plan for Medusa had Charles Company in the south acting as the hammer, with Major Geoff Abthorpe's Bravo Company in the north playing the anvil. To the east and west, other coalition forces – Dutch, Danish, American – hemmed in the insurgents and attempted to block their escape routes. While the Canadian forces were mainly comprised of 1st Battalion, RCR, out of Petawawa, Ontario, there were sizeable contingents of 2 Combat Engineer Regiment, Royal Canadian Dragoons, PPCLI, an ISTAR Squadron (Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance) led by Major Andrew Lussier and then, of course, there were the men with no names – Canadian and allied special forces – flitting in and out of the shadows.

Medusa was intended to counter the sizeable enemy force that had gathered in Panjwayi, just a few kilometres southwest of Kandahar city. Historically, this is notorious land for those foreigners who try to exert influence on southern Afghanistan. The British suffered heavily here as did, more recently, the Russians, who were never able to gain full control of the territory during their Afghan war in the 1980s.

Difficulty in conquering the district comes not only from its inhabitants – the birthplace of the Taliban, home of infamously intransigent Pashtun tribals – but from the terrain itself. Technically, some people call the Arghandab River area an oasis, but that image belies its strange desolation. The Red Desert lies a few kilometres south like a big giant furnace, making the air crispy and dry, sucking all the moisture from the land. And so, despite the lush greenery, life is hard, the people are hard, even the dirt is hard.

The marijuana fields in Panjwayi were dense and tall and difficult to fight through. 2006. (Photo courtesy Charles Company)

The landscape around Objective Rugby is a guerrilla fighter's paradise, crafted by literally generations of insurgents to be the ultimate redoubt. There are interconnected systems of irrigation ditches that look pretty much like a deep, wide trench system. Plus, real trench systems and fortified compounds and tunnels and endless bisecting tree-lines and fields of corn and dense marijuana growing so high you could only see the antennas of the Canadian vehicles as they moved around the battlefield.

And Rugby, centred on the white schoolhouse, was right at the centre of all the insurgent activity. So, it was a tough nut, perhaps the toughest. And everyone knew it. This is not hindsight, it was foresight: several sources report that the Canadian-produced intelligence at battle group and brigade level indicated that Rugby was the enemy's main defensive position in Panjwayi. But beyond the intelligence, the enemy position on Rugby was something proven in Canadian blood on August 3, one month prior, when the PPCLI lost four soldiers in their aborted attempt to take the white schoolhouse.

It was early on the morning of September 2 and Charles Company had seized Masum Ghar and Mar Ghar, both highpoints overlooking Objective Rugby and the area around Pashmul. As the RCR LAVs lined up and began blasting insurgent targets across the river, the engineer troops, led by Lieutenant Justin Behiels, began plowing new routes down into the riverbed.

Looking north from Masum Ghar, Rugby had several key features. A small road festooned with enemy bombs and mines – dubbed route Comox/Vancouver – hemmed in the objective from the east and north. To the west lay the white schoolhouse. And to the north, just a few hundred metres, was the village of Pashmul proper which would have to be cleared as well.

But before they ever got to that stage, there were many problems – a great

giant stack of problems – for Major Matthew Sprague to solve. The initial task was how to get his force across the Arghandab River and onto the objective.

Now, one thing to know about Sprague is that he is a leader. He doesn't dither or vacillate. What he says will happen, happens. But he has that other quality indispensable to leaders: he cares about his men like nothing else and they know he will be loyal. As a result, his men don't snipe at him, even subtly, and they don't question him.

If you are to get a sense of the battle – the wild misfortune and endless calamity of it all – you have to picture Sprague at the middle of the chaos, trying to orchestrate two things at once: rescue his wounded soldiers from the battlefield and find a way to counter, on the fly, the huge enemy force that had them all trapped and pinned down.

And that's the other thing you'll have to picture, constantly, is what the atmosphere was like there on the ground, with hundreds of enemy soldiers firing insane amounts of incoming fire from three sides, and the even greater amounts of Canadian outgoing fire, including almost constant coalition artillery, close air support and suppressing fire from Charles' 9 Platoon up on Masum Ghar.

Though the Arghandab River was shallow at this time of year, the riverbed itself was very wide, about 1,000 metres in some places. The force going across was comprised of Charles' 7 and 8 platoons complete, a group of engineers, a small convoy of Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers with their American embedded training team, an American route clearance team and Sprague's tactical headquarters, which included a forward air controller to help guide coalition air support.

A lot of the soldiers knew the enemy would expect them to cross here, but the assault force had few options. The only place with over-watch that morning was right there, right in front of Masum Ghar.

And they had to avoid Comox/Vancouver, so they were channelled from the very beginning.

They crossed the river without incident, made their breaches and moved up into the fields beyond. Scattered on the ground were the leaflets dropped there by NATO warning the locals that an operation was coming through. The locals had also been warned over the radio and all the local Afghan troops knew the plan as well. This was no surprise attack.

Before going across, the soldiers had heard from higher up that the enemy had abandoned their positions on Rugby. Despite the rosy warning, many of the soldiers felt something was up, their 'spider-senses' were tingling. But as yet there wasn't a shot fired and no sign of the enemy force hidden a few hundred metres away.

The place where they made an initial beachhead was about the size of a football field. It was hemmed in to the north and east by route Comox and to the West by berms, ditches and high marijuana fields. Things got briefly confused here as, at first, 7 Platoon had struck off to the north and run into route Comox. Seeing this, Sprague got on the net and ordered them to reorient themselves back toward the school directly. The platoon then passed through company lines to spearhead the attack on the school.

After the engineers made their second set of breaches, 8 Platoon's leader, Lieutenant Jeremy Hiltz, stood on the berm that bordered the main company position and watched Nolan ride through the ditch in the passenger seat of a G-Wagon, Nolan jokingly pressing his face up against the glass as if he were trying to escape. Then Hiltz saw Sergeant Shane Stachnik cross the ditch in a crouch. Stachnik gave him a funny look, as if to say 'This is crazy, but let's do it.'

Captain Derek Wessan gave a quick set of orders to 7 Platoon, who were to move through the engineer's breach and shake out into a battle line with the four LAVs – 3-1 Alpha, Bravo and Charlie, plus the engineer section in Echo

3-2 Alpha – slightly in front of the G-Wagon, call sign 3-1 W, which the soldiers who rode in it jokingly liked to call 3-1 'woof', for the last noise you'd hear as the vehicle was engulfed in flames. They were to advance to within 30 metres of the white schoolhouse, then halt and observe. Wessan, a hulking, tirelessly competent man, would normally have been riding in his own LAV, but it had broken down and was in for repairs, so he rode in the back of 3-1 Charlie instead.

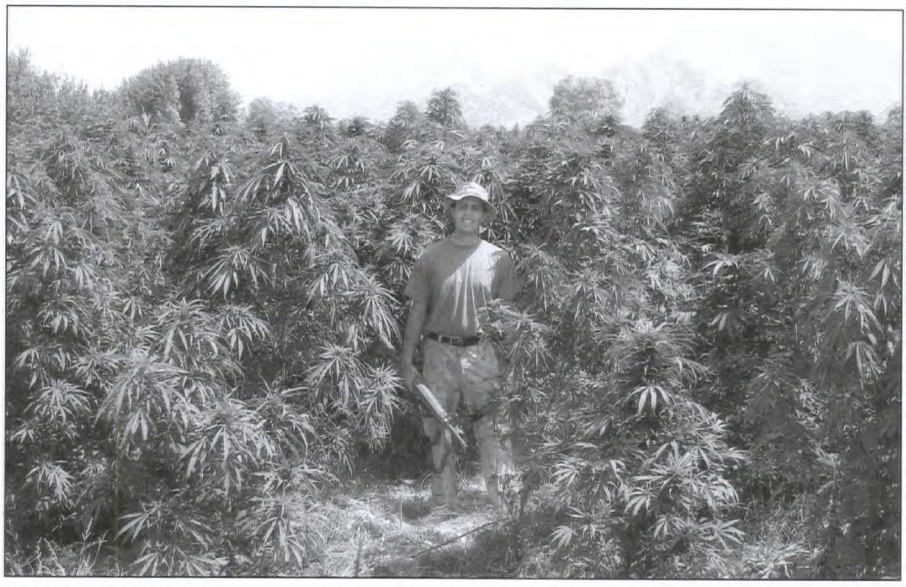
The four LAVs crept up through the breached irrigation canal and into the marijuana fields, which were so dense the drivers and gunners were having a hard time seeing through their sights. Behind them the G-Wagon bumped through the breach followed by Sprague himself in call sign 3-9er, who'd come forward to add firepower in case it was needed.

In 3-1 Charlie, Fawcett was observing the situation from the rear sentry hatch and, seeing they were about 30 metres from the schoolhouse, ordered his driver to stop. Seconds later Fawcett saw two things happen almost simultaneously. To his right, Echo 3-2's turret seemed to explode into pieces. He ducked down to report to Wessan what he'd seen. Then, to his left, he could see Teal waving his hands and yelling behind the G-Wagon which was blackened and smoking.

Fawcett jumped quickly back down from the hatch into the belly of the LAV, where he gave Wessan an update and reported that he was heading for the G-Wagon. "Follow me," Fawcett yelled to O'Rourke and Funnel before taking off in a sprint down the back ramp.

Running through the marijuana towards the G-Wagon, the noise of the guns was deafening and the enemy fire was shredding the tall plants. It was raining marijuana on the sprinting soldiers.

Moments before, in the G-Wagon's rear passenger side seat, Corporal Furoy was leaning forward trying to get a good look at his digital camera's rear display. He'd just passed the camera to Nolan who'd taken some pictures and



The marijuana fields around Objective Rugby, and throughout the area, were a tactical hazard.

(Photo courtesy Charles Company)

now wanted to know if there were any good ones.

Suddenly everything exploded. Furoy's first thought was that his camera had somehow detonated in his hands. But it hadn't. It was probably an RPG and it hit the front of the G-Wagon and exploded through the windshield, right into Nolan's face and chest. Shrapnel tore Furoy's shoulder apart and badly wounded the Afghan interpreter sitting to his left.

Now, with O'Rourke and Funnel treating Furoy and the interpreter, Fawcett and Teal put their attention to fighting off the enemy. Before long, Fawcett ordered his guys to take the wounded back to 3-1 Charlie which they did one at a time, traversing the distance twice under heavy fire – an act of bravery that resulted in a Medal of Military Valour for each of the two soldiers.

Despite his own wounds, once inside the LAV Furoy began caring for other wounded soldiers, something he would do right until he was evacuated from the battlefield several hours later.

Fawcett and Teal were now alone with Nolan's body at the G-Wagon. The incoming and outgoing, literally hundreds of weapons firing at once, was deafening. At the G-Wagon, the rounds were coming in from three sides, even spraying underneath the vehicle. Lying on the ground, Fawcett thought to himself: 'If the enemy rounds are coming under the G-Wagon, then why am I lying on the ground?'

He jumped up and yelled for Teal to do the same and they used the back of the vehicle for cover.

A few dozen metres to their left, 3-1 Bravo's main gun jammed after firing just a few rounds, Master Corporal Sean Niefer sat up in the hatch, exposed to enemy fire, laying down a barrage of his own from the turret-mounted machine-gun. For those who saw Niefer up in the turret, totally exposed as bullets and rockets flew in against him, this image would become almost emblematic of the whole battle. Niefer received the Medal of Military Valour.

On the right flank, Echo 3-2 – Stachnik's LAV – was looking pretty bad. For a few scary moments, everyone pretty much thought the vehicle was a catastrophic kill. Its turret had not only been blown to pieces, but it wasn't moving and there was no radio traffic coming from it.

Almost immediately a rescue operation was launched to get Echo 3-2 hooked up and pulled out of the kill zone. Just as a soldier was about to attach the cable, Echo 3-2's driver regained consciousness and had the presence of mind to reverse out and drive up the rear of the battle line, leaving the soldier holding the cable, standing in the field.

The first place Echo 3-2 stopped was at Sprague's LAV, where Corporal Derick Lewis and Master Corporal Jean-Paul Somerset jumped out to begin treating casualties. Lewis climbed up onto the LAV and, after finding Stachnik was dead, moved on to begin treating the wounded crew commander.

Just moments before, Lewis had seen something very rare – an actual enemy fighter running in the open, just about 75 metres in the distance. He raised his rifle and put his eye to the sight and fired. His first shot missed. He fired again, and again. The enemy fighter crumpled and fell dead.

Some guys remember well, and for some it gets hazy. Lewis is a whole other story. He remembers these events in crystalline detail, recounting shot-by-shot, second-by-second events like they happened 25 minutes ago.

Now though, Lewis had switched to first aid instead of fighting. Almost out of nowhere, an American soldier, a medic embedded with the ANA, showed up and began to help with the casualties. Once it was clear they were all taken care of, Lewis volunteered to take the American back to friendly lines and so the two began a massive long-distance run across basically the entire battlefield, some 700 metres each way for Lewis. While the two were pinned down once on the way to the American position, and Lewis was blown off his feet on the return trip, they both made it without a scratch.

Across the radio, Sprague had begun to organize 7 Platoon into a retreat out of the encircled kill zone and back to company lines.

To this end, 3-1 Bravo pulled up to the G-Wagon and dropped its ramp. Fawcett began dragging Nolan's body towards it. The first soldier out of the LAV saw the situation and stopped dead in his tracks near the bottom of the ramp and the soldiers behind piled into him.

In short order they loaded Nolan inside and were about to take off. Quickly, Fawcett saw it wasn't going to work; the LAV was packed to the roof and there was no room left. Fawcett looked at his fellow section commander, Sergeant Brent Crellin, and made a pretty hard choice. "Get out of here," Fawcett yelled to Crellin over the sound of battle. He and Teal

would stay, fight and try to find another way out.

Crellin hit the switch to raise the LAV's ramp. "Good luck," he shouted to Fawcett.

Teal and Fawcett then moved back to the rear of the burning G-Wagon and began firing at the enemy again.

Despite being in the relative safety of the LAV's armour, 3-1 Bravo was about to find a whole new kind of misfortune. Corporal Jason Ruffolo was the LAV driver. Now, Ruffolo is the kind of guy you want on your side in a fight. From the look in his eye, the way he holds his head, you just know he's going to be there when he's needed. With rounds crashing off the LAV, Ruffolo took off at speed through the marijuana field and, missing the single breach, slammed heavily into an irrigation ditch that was 2.5 to 3 metres deep.

At first, when they crashed into the ditch, all Ruffolo could hear were people screaming on the intercom and his immediate thought was that he'd killed the whole section.

So now things had gotten even more complicated. Not only was 7 Platoon caught in a wild crossfire, three of their six vehicles were either partially or totally out of the battle.

But this wasn't the only action going on. Far on the left flank, beyond the kill zone where 7 Platoon was stuck, 8 Platoon was fighting a woolly battle to secure a group of compounds down by the bank of the Arghandab. The platoon had dismounted from their LAVs and were fighting compound-to-compound, kicking down doors and clearing rooms, gunning down enemy fighters.

On the far right flank, the ANA soldiers had been launched into a marijuana field and were fighting north toward route Comox. While undoubtedly

aggressive, the ANA were kept kind of quarantined from the main force, basically holding the northern flank, because nobody was sure of their weapons control and the risk of friendly fire was too high.

Meanwhile, back at the G-Wagon, Teal and Fawcett were still in the fight of their life. At least half a dozen rocket-propelled grenades screeched past and the pair were running out of ammunition. With no good options left, Fawcett and Teal took off on a hundred-metre sprint to get back to 3-1 Charlie. They made it in one piece, despite the odds. Teal received the Star of Military Valour; Fawcett the Medal of Military Valour.

There is more than one kind of insurgent in Panjwayi. First, there are the part-timers. These guys are mostly farmers or young men with nothing better to do. Maybe the Taliban pays them to fight, maybe drug lords pay them to fight, maybe they chose to fight for their own reasons. In general, these guys are amateurs. They do things like fire an AK-47 at an armoured column and then try to get away by running across an open field. LAV gunners have little trouble picking these men off, so they don't last long.

A rough estimate going into Operation Medusa was that maybe as many as half of the bad guys in the district were part-timers. A big part of the reason for this is that, through a series of blunders and corruption scandals, the local government had angered everybody to the point that Panjwayi was nearly in open rebellion.

However, at the other end of the enemy spectrum there are the A-listers. The all-star team. These guys have command and control. They have tactics. They stage co-ordinated attacks. They're devious and they're not that easy to kill. By all accounts, the forces currently pounding Charles Company were the serious shooters, the A-team.

Intelligence reports would later confirm that the Canadians blasting away at the muzzle flashes did kill dozens of these guys – maybe more, including one reputed medium-level commander.

With the evacuation of the forward position underway, the objective was now all about extracting 3-1 Bravo from the ditch.

In the ditch, Ruffolo could hear the 'ting ting ting' as small arms fire hit the LAV and he felt the vehicle rock as first one and then a second RPG slammed into the rear hatch area.

The plan was to tow it out using a bulldozer. In order to do this, two soldiers were ordered to get out and hook up 3-1 Bravo's tow cable. In the confusion though, they couldn't find the cable which had been stored on the front of the vehicle. Seeing this, and not wanting to stay trapped in the kill zone any longer, Ruffolo himself got out of the driver's seat and, exposing himself for several perilous minutes, hooked up the cable. But the heavy vehicle wouldn't budge, it was no use – the LAV wasn't moving. The order came down to abandon 3-1 Bravo, and slowly the men trapped in the back – several suffering badly after the crash – began to crawl out the hatch as the ramp couldn't be lowered. Ruffolo got out again, this time to unhook the tow cable from the LAV, allowing the dozer to churn off, the cable dragging behind it.

Ruffolo, now without a vehicle, ran up to another LAV, but they told him there was no room left. So, with no other options, he ran all the way back through the breach to the company position on his own.

In 3-1 Charlie, which was on scene to help the recovery, Wessan turned to Fawcett and said he was going to see if everyone escaped from 3-1 Bravo. Fawcett swears that Wessan covered the 20 metres to the irrigation ditch in a single leap.

Nolan's body was still in 3-1 Bravo, stuck in the ditch.

Now, just as Sprague was gearing up for the counterattack, two things happened almost simultaneously that effectively cost the Canadians the battle for Objective Rugby.

Back in the main battle position, a hasty casualty collection point had been formed by Corporal Lewis in the shelter of the big Zettlemeyer front-end loader and a big loose pile of dirt. While still under heavy enemy fire, the place seemed safe enough that no one really expected what came next.

The big round – probably from an 82 mm recoilless rifle — crashed into the side of the Zettlemeyer. The blast killed Private William Cushley pretty much outright. Funnel felt the heat of the blast and the next thing he knew he was on the ground 4.5 metres away. Lewis, too, caught the blast hard and was knocked sprawling, his arm and leg torn open. Company Sergeant Major John Barnes was also knocked down by the concussion, heavily injured. Warrant Officer Frank Mellish was there too. He'd come around from 8 Platoon's flank to see if he could help extract Nolan. By all accounts best friends, there was no way Mellish was going to stay back in this situation.

Mellish was blown back away from the Zettlemeyer, badly wounded. Ruffolo had just arrived on the scene and immediately began first aid out in the open, with no cover and with enemy bullets cracking all around. Ruffolo tried to stop the bleeding, he worked furiously, but after a few minutes he realized Mellish was gone.

Just a metre away, Funnel picked himself up off the ground after the blast and immediately saw Lewis crawling, obviously badly wounded, in the wrong direction.

"I'm hit. I'm hit," Lewis yelled. Funnel yelled at him that he was going the wrong way, going into the bullets instead of behind cover.

Just then, already wounded, a bullet ripped into Lewis' arm, jerking it out from under him. His first thought was 'F-k, I just got shot' and the next thing he knows someone is grabbing him around the waist, lifting him up and dragging him to safety. It was Funnel.

At about the same moment that the rocket hit the casualty collection point, Sprague heard the 'bombs away' call as a coalition aircraft dropped in on a nearby enemy position. Everybody knew the bomb was coming, they just didn't expect the 1,000 pound, laser-guided weapon to land on their heads. But it did, pretty much. The bomb landed just north of the main position and bounced in toward the ANA and the Canadians, coming to rest just metres in front of the company's tactical headquarters.

Sprague saw it and his first thought was that it was over for the lot of them.

In the engineer LAV, the driver called-up Lieutenant Behiels, the engineer leader, on the intercom.

"Um, sir, a giant bomb just landed right in front of us," he said.

"We're still alive," Behiels replied. "Keep firing."

Charles Company's lead elements pop smoke during the September 3 battle.
(Photo courtesy Charles Company)

No explanation was ever found for what went wrong. It was just one of those things.

With the right flank closed off by the 1,000 pounder, and the casualties piling up, there were few choices left except to get out and try again later. But there was one more thing to do. Sprague wasn't going to lose any more men retrieving Nolan's body, but he wasn't going to leave him there either.

So on his orders, pretty much the entire force faced forward and laid down an absolute barrage of suppressing fire, leaving just one thin corridor for an 8 Platoon LAV to make the perilous run up to 3-1 Bravo and retrieve Nolan's body.

That was the last piece of business Sprague thought they could accomplish and, with that done, they started to withdraw back to the middle of the Arghandab.

As everyone was gathering up for the withdrawal, there was one further, final misfortune. As Hiltz was doing a check on the men of 8 Platoon, to ensure everyone was accounted for, he discovered that one section was still out in the compound on the left flank. One way or another, their section commander had ended up back at the LAV without them and now it was up to Hiltz to go get his men.

With just a quick glance, Wessan, who had appeared suddenly beside Hiltz but had misplaced his rifle in the chaos, signalled he was good to go as well and the two of them took off.

Wessan hit the berm first with Hiltz still sprinting across the field behind him, cursing the heavy radio in his backpack for slowing him down.

The two officers, both platoon leaders, stood on the berm at the forward edge of the position, with enemy bullets cracking past. They could hear the

trapped soldiers screaming for help. Hiltz raised his C-8 and fired towards the flashes. Wessan fired his Browning pistol and the two of them hoped the covering fire, such as it was, would give the trapped section the courage to get up and get out of there. They did.

Charles Company headed back across the Arghandab and back onto 89. During the night they traded fire with insurgents and watched coalition aircraft destroy the vehicles they'd abandoned earlier.

In their official reports on the day – gained by Legion Magazine through Canada's Access to Information program – the military calls what happened on Objective Rugby 'an ambush.' In some sense, that's true; but largely, it is not. On August 3, the PPCLI were ambushed at the schoolhouse. Calling September 3 an ambush is sort of like calling what happened at Dieppe an ambush. A small Canadian force was sent on an attack against a numerically superior enemy in a well-established defensive position.

That said, nothing is certain. It's impossible to know whether the decision to commit to the attack on Rugby 48 hours in advance of the schedule cost lives or saved them. However, military minds are trained to grapple with probabilities, and while nothing is certain, it's hard to see how two days of heavy air strikes, direct fire and tactical manoeuvres could have failed to weaken the enemy.

In the end, it just didn't make sense to the soldiers. Here we have one plan, long developed and founded on encirclement, deliberate tactical advance and careful attrition of enemy forces in a well-established free-fire zone, working at cross-purposes with a run-and-gun frontal assault that depended more on surprise and the enemy's weakness than on Canadian strength. While perhaps either tactic might have worked, using both didn't make sense.

The enemy knew the Canadians were coming because the leaflets told them. There was no attempt at deception because deception wasn't part of the plan. The enemy was surrounded, cut off and wildly outgunned. As one soldier said, quietly, as if it were no big thing: "We held all the cards and we played their hand."

Sometimes you get the bear, sometimes the bear gets you.

Ultimately, the battle that day, in the bright Afghan sunshine, lasted about four hours – the force moved out at about 6 a.m. and the retreat began at about 9:20 a.m., which is known to be the exact moment Corporal Lewis was injected with morphine, because it's written on the helmet cover he has kept all this time, though he may donate it to his local Legion one day. While the battle cost the lives of four Canadian soldiers and wounded 10 others, if you want to know the hidden costs of this battle, and of this mission, all you have to do is sit down and talk to the veterans; you'd learn a couple of things. First is that you can often hear the experience in their voices – they crack and waver a bit when they talk about these events. Second, and this is the dead giveaway, you can see it in their eyes. They look around, down, up at the ceiling, often wincing, as if the story itself were causing pain. Sure, they still laugh and they tell funny stories about the day, but they describe it almost like it happened to somebody else. Maybe that's what they have to do.

As for the others, the ones who escaped without physical injury may not wear wound stripes on their uniforms, but many of them seem to carry that place in their head like it's a piece of shrapnel. While these injuries are unseen, they are no less real.

And while many would like to forget, others want to remember. Like Ruffolo. When he came home, he got a tattoo on his neck to remember his buddy, Cushley. He takes endless crap for it from the Army, but he doesn't care. He did it for his dead friend. To remember.

Soldiers hunker down in the Arghandab on September 3, 2006.
(Photo courtesy Charles Company)

While Medusa started badly for Charles company, it got worse the next morning. In just a few seconds, the pilot of an American A-10 Thunderbolt close air support fighter made a mistake that cost one more life – Private Mark Anthony Graham, a former Olympic sprinter – and wounded more than 30 others, some badly, including Sprague himself.

In the early morning haze, the pilot had mistaken a garbage fire lit by the Canadians for smoke from an enemy position and, lacking vital situational awareness, fired his fierce 30 mm chain gun at the unsuspecting target.

When the plane struck, Ruffolo was just over a rise with 7 Platoon. The plane hit 8 Platoon and the tactical headquarters. Ruffolo came running over the hill and saw what looked to him like a mass grave – men lying everywhere, pools of blood and just unbelievable carnage. He thought the whole platoon was dead.

For Sprague, right in the middle of the friendly fire incident, it was like watching a whole bunch of sparklers going off while he got the crap kicked out of him. What he remembers most is the concussion – or rather the amount of concussion – as kind of like getting punched in the nose a hundred times really hard. Sprague suffered serious shrapnel wounds to the head and body and was evacuated to Germany and then back to Canada, alongside several of his men.

Charles Company was done. They'd lost their commander, a great chunk of their junior leadership and almost 50 soldiers in total. For a short time, the unit was combat ineffective; where it used to be Medusa's hammer, it had now largely disappeared. The emphasis would now shift to Bravo Company, the new hammer, striking down on Rugby from the north.

As for Charles Company, not all of its soldiers were out of the fight. Wessan would stay in the field and his patched-together force, against all odds, would be among the first Canadians on Objective Rugby when it eventually fell to the battle group, 10 days later.

When the remains of Charles Company finally took Objective Rugby they erected a cross on the spot Warrant Officer Rick Nolan was killed.

(Photo courtesy Charles Company)

CHAPTER SIX
OPERATION MEDUSA:
THE FALL OF OBJECTIVE RUGBY

Whatever the new rotation of Canadian soldiers were expecting to find when they rotated into Kandahar in August 2006, it wasn't this.

They had trained for counter-insurgency warfare, but what they found was a lot closer to conventional war.

What they found was the battle of Panjwayi. It was a force-on-force battle against an enemy that employed a classic Soviet tactical defence. It was 16 weeks of pitched battles, air strikes and bloodshed.

The Canadians didn't choose to fight Medusa, not exactly. It was more like they had no choice. Enemy troops were massing and they were threatening everything. They had to be stopped.

So, the battle was on.

Between August 3 and October 14, 2006 – from the first major fight at the white school in Pashmul to the last big attack during Operation Medusa's reconstruction phase – 19 Canadian soldiers died in the battle of Panjwayi and many dozens more were injured.

One statistic really tells the tale: of the 19 soldiers killed during this period, 11 died as a result of direct enemy fire. In the six years Canada's had been in Afghanistan, only two other soldiers had ever been killed by direct enemy fire.

Panjwayi district, southwest of Kandahar city, is where the Taliban movement began at a little mosque in a village called Sangisar. The district itself is somewhat larger than the Medusa battlefield which was focused on a series of Taliban defensive positions in and around the village of Pashmul and which became known as Objective Rugby.

The pocket was bordered to the north by Highway 1, the busy main road between Kandahar and Kabul. To the south and east the Arghandab River formed a solid geographical boundary while, to the west, there was an endless warren of villages and rough terrain stretching into neighbouring Helmand province.

In this third and final part of Legion Magazine's series on Operation Medusa, the Canadian battle group, splintered by the loss of Charles Company, regroups and executes a methodical, phased attack from the north led by Major Geoff Abthorpe's Bravo Company of the 1st Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment.

Meanwhile, in the south, Major Andrew Lussier's ISTAR squadron – a nearly company-sized unit largely comprised of Royal Canadian Dragoons – took the remnants of Charles Company and reformed into Task Force Grizzly under the command of call sign Grizzly Six, an American colonel named Steve Williams who was now in charge of holding the southern battle line and disrupting enemy forces across the Arghandab River.

Bolstering the RCR forces in the north was Alpha Company of 2nd Battalion, PPCLI, led by Major Charles Wright. In addition, Task Force 31, comprised mainly of U.S. Special Forces, was roving around the southern area of the battlefield and Task Force Mohawk, a company of American soldiers drawn mainly from the U.S. Army's 10th Mountain Division were also involved in the fighting. Backing up the whole brigade were the big 155 mm guns of 2 Royal Canadian Horse Artillery, led by Major Greg Ivey.

Leading the Canadian battle group in the field was Lieutenant-Colonel Omer Lavoie, the RCR battalion commander. Back at Kandahar airfield, Brigadier-General David Fraser was the brigade commander, issuing orders to Lavoie while simultaneously commanding the NATO operations in southern Afghanistan.

A very rare photo of the aftermath of the A-10 strike on Charles Company at Masum Ghar, Sept. 4, 2006.
(Photo courtesy Charles Company)

Disguising a LAV with marijuana might not be in the field manual, but it worked. (Photo courtest Charles Company).

In the classic military sense, failure was not an option here. Lieutenant-General Michel Gauthier, the commander of Canadian Expeditionary Forces Command, was in a good position to see the high-level strategic pressure pushing the Canadians into action. "NATO's ISAF assumed responsibilities for operations in the south of Afghanistan in (early) August," explained Gauthier. "And so in the south of Afghanistan – and this is in the context of Afghan perceptions of the coalition and whether or not they are there to help, and Taliban and insurgent perception of the coalition – we have this new command responsible for the south of Afghanistan.

"So you have this dynamic where clearly the Taliban are showing an intent to test ISAF. And this is all about the credibility of ISAF in relation to Afghanistan and the Afghan government and so I would say there were all sorts of pressures on ISAF to demonstrate to the people of Afghanistan

that ISAF and NATO were committed to Afghanistan and were committed to protecting the people of Afghanistan. And that's not propaganda, that's real. I mean, this was reality at a strategic level in the south of Afghanistan.

"There was very real pressure, real present danger from this Taliban force which was adopting a conventional posture in Panjwayi and clearly demonstrating an intent to cut off Kandahar city and cut off Highway 1. None of which boded well, obviously, for the future of the south of Afghanistan. So, something had to be done in a couple of different respects both to gain the trust of the Afghan people, start to win their confidence, and to get those bad guys out of there so that the threat was removed."

Operation Medusa was going to end the threat and bring peace and stability to Panjwayi. It was going to be the first Canadian-led brigade in no-holds-barred mechanized ground combat since World War II, and it was about to get off to a very bad start.

It was Saturday, September 2, the first day of combat operations and Major Matthew Sprague's Charles Company had just roared up on their initial objectives – Masum Ghar and Mar Ghar – unopposed and begun hammering the Taliban across the Arghandab.

In the north, Abthorpe's company was already in position south of Highway 1 and beginning to trade fire with enemy forces there.

This operation was not a surprise. The enemy knew the Canadians were coming. It was part of the plan to give everybody in the area fair warning, to get all the civilians out of the way.

With Sprague and Abthorpe having seized their first-day objectives, according to the plan, they would begin a period of observation and intelligence collection and commence a 72-hour preparatory bombardment of

enemy forces in the pocket before putting in the ground attack.

In support of this, NATO allies had stacked the air space around Panjwayi with all sorts of air assets – fighters, bombers, attack helicopters, unmanned drones and even spy planes.

Down on the ground, just south of Masum Ghar, Lussier and his ISTAR squadron were about to witness something horrible. "Sir, take a look at this," yelled one of Lussier's men, as soldiers started looking at the sky, not believing what they were seeing.

Lussier came out of his LAV, looked up, and saw a big four-engine British Nimrod MR2 spy plane arcing across the sky, engulfed in bright orange flames and going down fast.

Lussier, alongside his men, stood and watched as the plane hit the ground and exploded just a few kilometres away.

Once it was down, the race was on to get to the crash site. Lussier sent his reconnaissance platoon off without hesitation. Any survivors might need help and it was imperative not to let them, or the crash scene, fall into enemy hands.

But nothing is simple in Afghanistan, and navigating the small roads and villages in order to get to the crash scene proved difficult. Fortunately, an American Apache attack helicopter appeared overhead and guided Lussier's force in the right direction.

Arriving on the scene, it was obvious no one had survived.

There were 14 men aboard the Nimrod when it crashed. It was the worst single-incident loss of British military life since the Falklands War in 1982. The plane was reportedly brought down by an electrical fire.

As soon as the Canadians secured the site, an American rescue squad landed and together they started the grisly task. The plane had exploded and disintegrated on impact and the wreckage was strewn widely about. "We swept the scene for human remains as well as any sensitive materials," said Lussier. "It was carnage and it was gruesome work. I think the biggest piece of human remains was maybe a little bit bigger than a soccer ball. There was all kinds of crap all over the place. It was a toxic jungle.

"I tell you, it was a strange case of irony here. Medusa hadn't really started, everybody was just posturing, and we were the first ones to see all this blood and gore and crap. And so, you know, my guys are kind of in shock."

As the night dragged on, Lussier and his squadron stayed at the crash scene, beginning work again early the next morning, September 3. "So morale was low, of course, and the guys were feeling sorry for themselves. Then Charles company goes across the river and they get smoked and we hear there are four guys dead and guys wounded and everything like that.

"It was quite an experience. I'm listening to the battle on the radio as I was walking the debris field. We were close enough that we could hear the shooting and explosions and everything. We could see the aircraft coming in and out, helping out. Listening to this thing on the radio was gut-wrenching. You just wanted to get the hell over there and help them out.

"I'll tell you, at that point my guys stopped feeling sorry for themselves. It was like, 'What the hell do we have to feel sorry about?'"

What Lussier was listening to were the sounds of charles company running head first into a huge and very well prepared enemy force on Objective Rugby.

Medusa was not going to be derailed so easily, but at mid-afternoon on September 3rd the situation was not looking so good. The first ground attack had failed and 18 coalition soldiers were dead. And there was more bad luck ahead.

A few kilometres north of Rugby, Abthorpe's company was spread out in a thin line south of the highway.

By the time Charles Company went across, Bravo Company had already been in position for a few days. "We were given a very simple task," said Abthorpe. "We were to give a feint south of the highway to distract the enemy. Everybody knew the battle group's focus was going to be south, but by pushing across the highway from Patrol Base Wilson, it was hoped that we would establish a guard, protect the highway and our lines of communication, but also draw some of the Taliban attention from the south to the north."

Bravo Company spread out along the edge of their first objective, dubbed Cracked Roof, which was a very deep ditch and road system that went through Pasab, a small village north of Pashmul.

Shortly after Bravo moved into position, they were attacked by two very ambitious insurgents who figured maybe they could take on an entire platoon of LAVs with nothing more than their AK-47 assault rifles. "It was the most surreal thing," said Abthorpe. "The two Taliban stood up in the open on a mud wall and started shooting at the LAVs with AKs, nothing else."

Having none of it, 5 Platoon, led by Lieutenant Jeff Bell, mounted a hasty attack on the compound from which the men were firing. They called in air burst artillery and rolled in, ending the resistance. Despite a detailed search,\ they only ever found one body.

"This stage (of Medusa)," said Captain Piers Pappin, leader of Bravo Company's 4 Platoon, "I liken to the phony war almost, like back in World

A close-up of an impromptu memorial cairn near Objective Rugby. (Photo courtesy Charles Company)

War II, just because we conducted our feint and we sat on this line for quite a number of days and didn't see a lot of enemy activity. We knew they were there but there was no movement or anything. That was the phony Medusa."

On the morning of September 3, Bravo was still patrolling up and down Cracked Roof as Major Abthorpe came to terms with the new tactical situation in the wake of Charles Company's surprise attack. "Now, the call for (the attack) came as a big surprise. Our orders, my orders, were to do the feint south of Highway 1. Charles Company would move up on Masum Ghar and the two of us, from either end, would observe patterns of life for at least 24 hours and then we'd start the 72-hour bombardment. I briefed on that fire plan. So, all of it seemed good.

"We roll across on the 1st and 2nd and we engage the Taliban. We see the Taliban really are here, so we're starting to build a picture. Then the night of the 2nd, I get the call saying 'Standby. Charles Company is going across.

Pass the word.'

"'OK', I thought. 'This is interesting.'

"They cross over. We know what happens. They redeploy back south across the river.

"So we go into holy f--k mode."

Given the amount of resistance Charles Company faced on Rugby, Bravo's soldiers assumed they would be going into a huge fight when they moved across Cracked Roof and onto their objective, dubbed Templar, directly north of Pashmul.

In the meantime, on the morning of September 3rd, Lussier's squadron had to come up north to Patrol Base Wilson, just near where Bravo was deployed, to drop off one of their soldiers, Corporal Kelly Dove, whose husband, Warrant Officer Rick Nolan, had been killed that day.

Lussier was then ordered to join Bravo Company as it prepared to assault across Cracked Roof early the next morning.

"The next day we were set at the start line at first light. I think it was 5:30 a.m", said Lussier", and we were all along just south of Highway 1."

The plan was for Bravo and ISTAR to charge across Cracked Roof to focus enemy attention northward. With orders for the attack hastily given, the soldiers were in their positions, getting ready for battle. "And that's when we got the news: 'Stop, stop, stop. Charles Company has just been f--king strafed,'" said Lussier.

On the morning of September 4, Charles Company, which had been ordered to gear up and re-cross the Arghandab for a second attack on Rugby, was hit by an American A-10, killing Private Mark Graham and

wounding more than 30 others, including Sprague, the commanding officer.

Everything came to a stop. Offensive operations were largely halted as the Canadian leadership figured out what to do next. Lussier's ISTAR squadron moved out into a temporary position in the desert while Bravo held the northern battle line.

It was time for a serious reappraisal of the battle plan. Everyone held fast while the men at the top conferred. "Well, (Lavoie) and I talked a lot after that friendly fire incident," said Fraser. "I actually called (Lavoie) into my headquarters, so we could determine when we were going to cross the river.

"We changed the plan because there was a significant event that day and I used it as an opportunity to make the Taliban believe that we were going to continue to cross the Arghandab as they thought we would. And then, instead, move the focus to the north, come from the north to the south in an area the Taliban didn't think we would come from.

"That's where Task Force Grizzly came into play. We took the remnants of Charles Company, gave them some snipers, gave them some people controlling direct fire and close air support, and I said to Colonel Williams, 'I want you to make yourself look like a thousand-man organization. Make the Taliban believe you are still Omer Lavoie.'

"And that's what we did for the next three to four days; we kept squeezing the Taliban from three different directions, coming from the north, Task Force Grizzly from the south and Task Force 31 to the southeast. And we did that until we actually got onto Rugby."

With the operation now focused firmly on Bravo Company, things started to happen up north. In one memorable event, soldiers caught a few Taliban leaders trying to 'get out of Dodge'.

"A white sedan pulls up," remembers Abthorpe, "and they're trying to leave our security bubble. So we're like 'Where'd you come from? Why are you leaving?' So we're talking to these three older guys and that's when their cell phone rang. The interpreter (working for the Canadians) grabbed the phone and started talking. It was a senior Taliban commander yelling at these three guys, saying 'Why aren't they attacking the Canadians? Because they had great success in the south, they should be attacking in the north.' Well, these guys were trying to flee at that point."

On September 5, Bravo took their first casualties – four wounded – when a group of enemy fighters tried to flank their position and targeted one of their LAVs with rocket-propelled grenades and recoilless rifle fire.

Despite the enemy activity, Bravo soldiers were patrolling up and down Cracked Roof, the deep ditch, trying to get an understanding of the terrain and gather intelligence on enemy positions.

With all the forces in place, Bravo eventually put their breach in and got across the ditch and began heading south. For the next few nights, the reconnaissance platoon would head out into the darkness, scouting the way ahead for the troops to push through the next day. It was a classic advance and Bravo cut south through the light resistance and onto objective Templar. "The Taliban, from the time they chose to fight conventionally, mimicked, almost to the letter, Soviet-style tactics from the Cold War that many of us were trained on as young officers," said Abthorpe.

"They had two-man observation posts, a very thin outer defensive line, but as we get into it, very, very solid defensive positions on both Objective Rugby and (the other objectives). Very, very detailed, very well dug in. In hindsight, it's easy to analyse and go 'textbook, absolutely textbook conventional tactics.'"

Meanwhile, down south on Masum Ghar and Mar Ghar, Lussier and Task Force Grizzly were inflicting major damage on the trapped and surrounded Taliban.

"My orders were simple," said Lussier. "Disrupt the enemy.

"The Taliban did us a big favour; essentially they had kicked all the civilians out so it was very much a linear battlefield at that point. So there were my lines and there was the Arghandab River, which was essentially in no man's land, and then everybody on the other side was Taliban. It made life so much easier for us. Essentially we just shot and bombed the crap out of these guys for the better part of four or five days while the battle group made their way from the north."

Lussier and his surveillance team spent a lot of time listening in on the Taliban as they spoke on the radio. "They had voice procedures on the radio just like we do and during that time you could tell that we were not letting these guys get any sleep whatsoever; they were getting no rest. We were bombing the crap out of them constantly. And you could tell after about the second or third day there were a lot of arguments on the radio, a lot of names being used and so we garnished a lot of intelligence from them just from what they were saying.

"For example, Ahmed is calling Haji on the radio and he says, 'Hey are you going to supper?' And the other replies, 'No, the commander told me I can't leave the white bridge.'

"So I look on my air surveillance photo and I say, 'Hey, there's the white bridge.' So as I'm calling an artillery mission on it, he comes back on the radio and says 'We're just all meeting at the barn just behind you.' So I blow the snot out of the white bridge and blow the snot out of the barn. And then we hear: 'We have lots of casualties, send the trucks.' So we wait and watch and see the trucks show up and blow the crap out of the trucks, too.

"There were 80 guys killed that day. We saw it. We watched it. So, this isn't speculation here. So it's all things like that: people making mistakes because they're exhausted and stressed. We killed a lot of people, you know, we killed a lot of Taliban. And they're just not set up to take a couple of hundred casualties. They're not set up to evacuate them. They're not set up to look after those kind of wounded. So they just fall apart. And so that was part of the disruption task."

However, things weren't entirely going to plan in the south. Colonel Williams, the American in command of Task Force Grizzly, had a uniquely aggressive approach to war fighting. Described variously as 'ballsy' and 'a cowboy', Williams was always out in front, leading the advance, but he had some difficulty convincing Lussier and the other Canadian officers that his run-and-gun approach was really the best idea.

The situation came to a head several times, but most notably in the second week of September when Williams ordered Lussier and the remnants of Charles Company to cross the Arghandab and head into enemy territory with little preparation or intelligence.

"Well the thing is that I was the senior Canadian there attached to him and he wanted to just go," recalled Lussier. "He basically said 'OK, let's go. We're going across the river right now.'

"And I told him 'no.' But that's not an easy thing for a major to tell a full colonel, but I told him, 'No.' I said, 'Listen, there's some things we need to find out about this.'

"I wanted to send reconnaissance across the night before to check the bank at the other side, to make sure we could actually get the vehicles up and over, because what's the use in trying to do an assault river crossing if you can't get a toehold on the other side of the river?

"So I ended up winning the argument. I said 'Look we're not going to go

half-assed. We've tried that, we got f--king smoked.' So I told him we're going to send the reconnaissance patrol across. So we did, and then we shot across the next day.

"I just wasn't prepared to put Charles in that position again. There was just no way. It just didn't make any sense. The thing is, in the end, time doesn't mean anything over there. If it doesn't work today, we'll go tomorrow. It's not like they're advancing on us. It's not like they're advancing on Ottawa.

"He pulled me aside afterward and he said, 'Listen,' he goes, 'I'm sensing a little hesitation in you to act.' And when I explained to him exactly what I was thinking, he was OK with that. But I mean I could have got my ass fired right then and there."

In the end, Charles Company did go back across the Arghandab. This time, they didn't use the same crossing, they went across farther to the east, near Mar Ghar, and they encountered little or no resistance.

Captain Derek Wessan, leader of Charles' 7 Platoon, was attached to Task Force Grizzly and he was among the first soldiers onto Rugby proper in the coming days.

Wessan recalls a slightly chaotic scene as units were tasked to advance toward Rugby rapidly in a search for the enemy. "There was minimal information coming from Grizzly Six," said Wessan. "He would just go, 'Ah, push two kilometres that way.' And every time, we'd achieve our limit of exploitation, and then we'd get the order, 'Go another kilometre.' Essentially we were advancing to contact, without saying it I guess.

"We weren't doing it as deliberate as I would have liked to have done it.

"So we keep pushing. We push again. And all of a sudden we're in this field. We weren't geographically f--cked up, we just didn't know exactly

where we were, and where we were was where Frank Mellish and Will Cushley got killed on September 3rd."

It was dark when Wessan arrived on Rugby. He climbed out of his LAV and saw the remains of the vehicles they'd left behind nearly two weeks before, now destroyed by coalition air strikes. "We were the first troops on that position since the 3rd," Wessan noted, quietly.

Then, the next morning, they got the order to head north into the maze of compounds and tight defensive terrain in Pashmul itself. Again, they were advancing with no real plan, just following Colonel William's directive to move. "I kind of lost it at that point," said Wessan. "I said, 'This is not how we do things. We're gonna lose somebody.'

"The platoon itself wasn't operating in a careless manner, but the scheme of manoeuvre was not as tight as I would have liked.

"The thing was – why I lost my temper – was because I made a promise to my guys, from here on out we're going to try to do things as deliberate as we can, so we weren't going to push anyone else home early."

Fortunately, by this point the Taliban forces had been torn up by almost 10 days of constant air strikes, artillery and direct fire from the LAVs and, aside from a few small contacts, there was no major fighting as Rugby fell. "We established a line just north of the school, and then all of a sudden we start seeing LAV antennas to the north," explained Wessan. "It was crazy. And that was it, Rugby was secure and everything was good to go."

In the end, Grizzly Six was a man heralded by one and all as a brave combat leader, most often seen driving into the direction of enemy fire. However, his willingness to risk the lives of the men under him in a similar fashion didn't go over quite as well.

One of the constant themes of Operation Medusa has been this struggle

to find a balance between aggressive operations and reckless operations. What lies in the balance is battlefield intelligence. Without sound intelligence, any advance will entail great risk and possible calamity. Certainly Charles Company learned this the hard way on September 3. However, as Fraser notes, battlefield intelligence is never certain and even the best estimations of the enemy situation are apt to be wrong.

"Here's the other thing I think Canadians have got to appreciate," said Fraser. "You don't ever have 100 per cent intelligence, OK? Metaphorically speaking, on a good day I would get 20 per cent. You can follow all the theoretical lines of A through Z of all the things you have to do, but at the end of the day, you fight an enemy and you've got to work in a truncated world and this is hard stuff."

Meanwhile, for the commanders on the ground, it is no doubt the unreliability of intelligence that leads them to rely on methodical tactics and deliberate advance.

While the military is by no means a democracy, neither is it a dictatorship. The Army has doctrine and planning specifically to build consensus on how operations are to be conducted. Even still, doctrine can be ignored and plans can be abandoned; the tactical commander still has to decide whether to follow the order or not.

As Gauthier notes, "This is combat operation, and it's tactical operation, and there are no black and white answers and there are no 100 per cent correct solutions to the problems that you face in combat. And I guess it comes down to judgement at each level, whether a particular decision on a particular day was appropriate or not appropriate."

As for command and control during Medusa, Gauthier said he has no reason to challenge or second-guess any of the decisions made at the brigade level during the operation. Despite instances of tactical commanders like Lussier, Lavoie, Sprague and Wessan making reasoned objections to cer-

tain orders, for Gauthier the issue comes down to the military necessity of heeding authority in the chain of command.

"If (Lavoie) was not comfortable doing what he was asked to do to the point where he just thought it was not the right thing to do, he wouldn't have done it. And the same applies to Sprague. And so not withstanding the fact that they probably didn't think this was the best way to skin the cat, there are many different ways to skin the cat."

In any case, now that the combat phase of Operation Medusa was theoretically finished, the reconstruction phase of the operation could begin.

The effort to rebuild Panjwayi and connect it more deeply to the Kandahar economy was focused heavily on the construction of a new road, called Route Summit, which would run directly north from the town of Bazaar-e-Panjwayi to meet up with Highway 1 near Patrol Base Wilson.

For the next month and, indeed, for the next several months, much of the battle group's focus was on defending Route Summit and holding the territory for which they had just fought.

While the major combat operations were over on September 14, the Taliban didn't seem to accept their defeat. And indeed, it was this period of reconstruction that proved to be deadlier than the operation itself, as a combination of roadside bombs, suicide bombs, combat and mine strikes killed another 10 Canadian soldiers in the month that followed the capture of Objective Rugby.

The problem for the Canadians guarding the construction of Route Summit was that while they could ably defend their new road, they lacked the manpower to sweep westward in order to kill the enemy, or at least push them back.

"We did not have enough combat power to do that kind of sweep," said Lussier. "You'd need a brigade to do that. And the other thing that people don't take into consideration is that our leaves started at that point.

So a third of the force is gone. You know even if we would have had the full combat team or the full battle group there, I still honestly don't think we would have had enough combat power. I mean even for us to take Pashmul we had American help. And we were the priority for all air in the theatre, which all kind of went away after that. I mean, we always had it when we needed it, but we certainly didn't have it stacked like we did in Pashmul."

The issue of finding sufficient combat power was something Fraser was well acquainted with. In the end though, there were only so many troops available. "NATO was politically hamstrung to give me anything more than I could get (from inside my brigade)," said Fraser. "The other NATO countries were politically constrained as to what they could provide me. And that's not Dave Fraser's thing to comment on; it was what it was, OK? That's my favourite saying: It was what it was and you deal with it."

The reality was that there weren't enough troops, NATO or Afghan National Army, to clear and hold the ground in order to prevent the Taliban from attacking.

Looking at the numbers, it's hard to claim that all of the NATO allies are truly making the Afghan mission a priority. The combined military forces of the NATO alliance total slightly more than nine million men, and yet only 38,500 are in Afghanistan – less than half a per cent of the total force.

In contrast, Canada's 2,500-strong Afghan task force represents about 2.6 per cent of its total military forces, regular and reserve. If NATO countries were contributing on par with the Canadian commitment, there would be 238,225 troops in Afghanistan.

It's hard not to see the NATO effort as an attempt to win a complex and difficult war with the smallest possible commitment. The result of this seems to be that NATO is too strong to lose and yet too weak to win.

In the end, Medusa was deemed a tactical success. The operation cleared the Panjwayi pocket and ended Taliban hopes of knocking NATO out of Afghanistan in one fighting season.

However, the battle for Panjwayi isn't over yet. Canadian troops continue to die there.

While it may be too soon to say whether Panjwayi will ever enjoy a NATO-secured peace, what is clear is that between August 3 and October 14, 2006, the Canadians fought to clear the district. They killed a lot of men, but they lost a lot too. This was a historic battle.

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These men died: Corporal Chris Reid, Sergeant Vaughan Ingram, Corporal Bryce Keller, Private Kevin Dallaire, Sergeant Shane Stachnik, Warrant Officer Rick Nolan, Warrant Officer Frank Mellish, Private Will Cushley, Private Mark Graham, Private Dave Byers, Corporal Shane Keating, Corporal Keith Morley, Corporal Glen Arnold, Private Josh Klukie, Sergeant Craig Gillam, Corporal Robert Mitchell, Trooper Mark Wilson, Sergeant Darcy Tedford and Private Blake Williamson.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRIGADIER-GENERAL DAVID FRASER

In any war story, in whatever form, it's difficult for a writer to include the full perspective of everyone involved in the action. While the interview that follows may only be of historical interest, it does contain a great deal of information about the kinds of thing going on behind the scenes during Operation Medusa and the entire (ongoing) battle of Panjwayi. The interview was conducted over the phone during the summer of 2007.

DAY: Can you tell me when you arrived in Afghanistan and when you left, and what your role was during that period?

FRASER: Well, my role never changed. I arrived there in February of 2006. I left in November of 2006.

DAY: Your role didn't change when NATO took over from Operation Enduring Freedom?

FRASER: No, there's a perception it did, but the reality on the ground was 'no'. So when I took over in February of 2006, my commitment to the people was the effects that they had received under the American-led brigade would be the same effects that they would receive with the multinational brigade that I commanded; and that was important from a philosophical point of view, because for the Afghans it's all about international support, it's all about what they perceive the international support to be, and they didn't want to see it change.

The effects on the ground did not change. A lot of the rhetoric at the strategic level changed, but effects on the ground did not because, in the end, the Taliban had a vote, and the Afghan people were driving the ship. While the reality was I probably did 99 per cent of the work because I had the resources, the other one per cent, which was the most important, was taking direction from an Afghan president, an Afghan governor, a Corps commander and a chief of police to tell me to be where they needed the help the most. That kind of brings us to Panjwayi.

DAY: Can you describe Panjwayi, and the importance of Panjwayi for the province and the city of Kandahar?

FRASER: First of all, Panjwayi is not new. And second of all, I say to every reporter that Afghanistan is a novel akin to War and Peace. Everybody who tries to take a snapshot of Afghanistan or Panjwayi misses the context, and the context is that conflict in Panjwayi has been going on for over 30 years.

[He mentions two books by Lester Grau about the Soviet experience fighting in Panjwayi.] I read both of them before I went to Afghanistan. In both books, it talks about Panjwayi, and there has been fighting in Panjwayi for as long as Afghanistan's been around because there is an Afghan saying that what happens to Kandahar affects the entire south. And right now, Kandahar is the most strategic city in the country. So, a year ago, two years ago, the Americans were in Panjwayi, and we were in Panjwayi when we first got there in May and June. We had some major confrontations and it was only then that we started to realize there was something more going on in Panjwayi. And by the 3rd of August, when Lieutenant-Colonel Ian Hope's battle group got hit pretty hard there, it became clear what the intent was of the Taliban. And I'd seen this before, and I went back to those two books, and I walked into headquarters and I said the Taliban has taken a page out of the mujahideen's tactic book and here's what their intent is.

DAY: So what was that intent?

FRASER: Their intent was to put pressure on Kandahar city, which was the strategic centre of gravity for the south. And not to attack the city directly, but attack it by putting pressure on the city in an area of their choosing. And the area that you've seen. Have you been out there?

DAY: Yeah, I was out there.

FRASER: It is akin to World War I trench warfare. And you don't have to build the trenches. A lot of people said, 'Well how come you didn't see the Taliban building trenches?' and I said, 'They're already built.' And they are the most sophisticated system I have ever seen because you know, grape yards, canals, what not; you can't see them. They just run in underneath the trees. So by attacking Kandahar indirectly, they would put pressure on the city, proving the inability of the Afghan government to protect the key city in the south and the inability of the international community to support Karzai, to support the people, and thereby achieving their objective of showing the ineffectiveness and, thereby, achieving a tactical victory which had strategic effects.

DAY: [Convoluted question about how the battle group from the previous rotation, Task Force Orion, played in the early stages of Medusa.]

FRASER: Now, it was clear what the Taliban's intent was by August, but it was in July that we first started connecting the dots. And the reason why we were in Panjwayi initially was because the governor wanted to move grapes from the field to the market. So we were actually aiming to do an operation, not a combat operation, but getting grapes to the market. That's when we found out that the Taliban had moved in there, and were moving in force. And the other thing was, that's when we confirmed their intent, we also found out that the Taliban had changed their tactics. They went from small group hit-and-run to a conventional come-and-get-me. Their intent was to prove to the world and the Karzai government that they could take us on. It was the culmination of their 2006 idea, I won't even say campaign plan. It was their idea of how they wanted to finish off the fighting that year, and finish off the fighting in total. Because in counter-insurgency doctrine or theory, there's an evolution of insurgencies in that they go from insurgent tactics to more conventional tactics.

DAY: Mao's 3rd stage, right?

FRASER: Yeah, that's right, and they had moved to the 3rd stage because they thought they could win it then. What they underestimated was that I was onto their plan, I knew what their intent was. By August, after we'd confirmed what the Taliban's intent was, we adapted and wrote a plan to counter the Taliban's intent. And the plan was initially key leadership engagement. In consultation with the Afghans, they told me that there were three key districts that mattered: Arghandab, Zari and Panjwayi. The other ones didn't matter in this case. And my intent was that this was an Afghan problem; and the best way to solve an Afghan problem – because the Taliban were actually occupying and forcing people out of their homes or using them as human shields – was Afghan engagement, because there are more Afghans than there are Taliban. So we said, 'We will support you, and we will help with reconstruction projects, government projects, and

have you deal with the Taliban directly yourselves, and try to resolve this without shooting.' So we spent a significant effort on key leadership engagement and reconstruction to attempt to resolve this without having to fire a shot.

And that was the first phase of the operation, long before the fighting took place.

DAY: Alright, as a part of that preliminary phase of Medusa, can you take me through the decision to drop the leaflets and when that was decided and why?

FRASER: That was decided during the creation of this plan. We spent most of August building up the plan and working on that. The leaflets were again intended to show the people that our fight was not with them. We were siding with the Karzai government and the local Afghan leadership to work together with an Afghan-led operation to oust the Taliban out of the area. And the leaflets were telling the people we're not there to fight them or hurt them; we're only there to rid them of the Taliban threat. And when you see us, don't get in our way because we're not after you, we only want to get to the Taliban. Now, I'm going to jump to the end of the story here for a second: the leaflets were very effective. [When we moved in, we found that] south of Highway 1 and north of the Arghandab river there were only Taliban or empty houses because the people had gone; they had all left.

DAY: One thing I have yet to get a full understanding of is how it came to be that such a large mass of insurgents could get to Panjwayi and could set up there? Was it a vacuum created by Operation Mountain Thrust over in Helmand? What's your impression of how they were able to mass in such big numbers there?

FRASER: Well first of all, we actually fixed a lot of the Taliban in Helmand when we were there. There were three different units in Helmand in early

June and July. I had one British task force and another American task force that came out of regional command east. And what we did was we were actually moving the Taliban around. So once we finished in Helmand and we were coming back to Kandahar, that's about the same time in late July, early August, that the Taliban actually started to concentrate in Panjwayi. So there wasn't a vacuum, and it happened long before Lavoie got on the ground. There wasn't a vacuum. So it is not who's doing it right, who's doing it wrong; that's too simplistic. It is a story that takes years to tell. Counter-insurgencies are not won over the course of a summer; it takes years; and also one day you wake up and it's fixed.

DAY: According to my understanding, Medusa started on September 2 in earnest; the actual operation started on the 2nd. Is that true?

FRASER: I think you should say the operation started around August. This particular phase of the battle for Panjwayi heightened in September, but it really started in earnest in August. It started in August because I think the Taliban were concerned about our operations throughout the south since we had arrived in February. They heightened in August when they thought that they could actually transition into phase three of counter-insurgency and they could take us on, maybe in part because they were concerned if they didn't do it now they weren't going to be able to do it. They got cocky. They thought they could take on the international community. It was a big mistake. We started with the key leadership engagement and reconstruction. Again, maybe that was so successful that the Taliban actually had to go and become combat-oriented themselves and try to fight us. Now, while we were in August planning out and controlling the enemy's intent, starting a reconstruction, I went and got additional resources for the fight. So I got some out of the British who worked for me, I got the Danish squadron, I brought down Dutch from the north, I brought in Americans in the form of special forces and a company out of Regional Command East, in addition to Lavoie's battle-group.

So this was a big effort from a brigade point of view. I pulled in troops from

my entire brigade which comprised nine nations across four provinces down into Panjwayi because the Taliban were not going to win. I was very firm when I said you've taken on the wrong guy when you take on Dave Fraser because I'm going to beat you here. I created two other task forces to complement Lavoie's. So once I had those in place we circled the wagons, so to speak, and then we moved around and forced the Taliban to pop their head up and we lopped it off.

Here again is one of the finesses of Operation Medusa. Understanding the enemy's intent, I had determined that they wanted me to attack them head-on à la World War I at enormous cost in soldiers, both Afghan and coalition. I would not accept that as an acceptable course of operations. So when I said that we started off with key leadership engagement, we circled the wagons and we would only engage with precision munitions, this was all designed to mitigate collateral damage to Afghans and their fields and their huts, and also to mitigate the threat to my own soldiers, both Afghan and coalition. So the result of the way that we approached this fight was – and I'm talking about excluding the friendly fire that happened in September – we suffered four casualties. When we got into the heavy fighting, four.

DAY: It's amazingly few considering what could have happened.

FRASER: We suffered four casualities and we probably inflicted over a thousand. So I think from that point of view, and that's very narrow point of view, it was a fairly successful operation. But the effects, i.e., key leadership engagement, reconstruction that's going on now, the 30,000 people that are back in there today, far outweigh the combat. But the combat was done about as sophisticated and with as much finesse as we could ever make it be.

DAY: OK, so let's move forward to September 3. In my story, the first part will focus quite heavily on the battle on September 3. The battle for Objective Rugby. Lavoie describes this as 'the toughest nut' in the area. So can you describe this area around the schoolhouse and what made it so tough?

FRASER: That was the ground that the Taliban had chosen to defend, and also, it was the ground where the mujahideen had defeated the Soviets 20 or 30 years earlier, and that was the area where they thought they could defeat us. Just jumping to the end, General Khan, the head of the Afghan army, said that we had done something that no one had ever done in the entire history of Afghanistan. We beat the Taliban on the ground that no one else had beaten the insurgency on. He was sitting in my office when we were recounting the battle on the map; he was absolutely giddy, looking at me saying, 'You've done something no one else has ever done.' We had beaten them. On that ground.

DAY: That schoolhouse in that village there, in Pashmul, is very close to Bazaar-e-Panjwayi; is it fair to say that it's at the centre of the whole thing?

FRASER: That was the centre of the whole thing, and let me just tell you how it all fits out. Rugby was where we had assessed that the Taliban wanted us to fight them on. That was their main battleground, and their whole defence was structured to have us come in across the Arghandab river in the southeast, cross that and fight into Rugby. And the schoolhouse was kind of like the area in the centre, and there were big killing fields to the east and to the north of that schoolhouse. Ian Hope hit that on the 3rd of August, first the improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to the east and then the other platoon engaged in the open, just around the schoolhouse. That's when we figured out that that was a major killing, fighting area for the Taliban. In early September, we went at Rugby. The unfortunate incident – I think it was the 3rd of September, – was the friendly fire.

DAY: The 4th.

FRASER: The 4th. It actually became an opportunity because I had decided that on the 3rd we were going to attack into Rugby on the 4th. (Note: dates are off by one day.) Why did I decide that? And you'll probably hear some people say that was not the plan.

DAY: Yeah, I have some questions about that coming up.

FRASER: Well I'm going to answer some of those questions. You fight the enemy guided by a plan. You don't fight a plan. If you fight a plan and ignore the enemy, you will fail. You will incur lots of casualties and you will fail. A plan only gets you thinking and gets you to meet the enemy. And the enemy has a vote. So probably on the 1st or the 2nd, I had decided the situation was changing so that we could attack.

DAY: I think that was the 2nd.

FRASER: I gave [Lavoie] the orders on the 2nd to attack. It was in advance of what the plan said. Well I don't care about the plan. You fight the enemy, and the stage in the game then was that we were ready to go in; the enemy was ready to be attacked and finished. So on the morning of the 4th, we were 20 minutes away, in fact Lavoie had actually gotten into the objective on the 2nd or 3rd. He was across the river. He was on Rugby. So again, based on all the intelligence I had received that day, the fact that we had gotten into the objective, the conditions were right to finish this thing off.

DAY: According to what I know, you visited Masum Ghar on the 2nd and at that point gave the order to move up the attack 48 hours to the night of the 2nd, which eventually became that the attack went in on the morning of the 3rd. [A few of the leaders on the ground] told me that from the intelligence they had, they weren't clear on what they were going to find; but the intelligence that came down from higher was that the Taliban had partly or largely fled. So, what was your reading of the intelligence situation because you must have been privy to quite a bit of intelligence at your level that would have led you to make that decision to push it forward?

FRASER: When you talk to a soldier, the soldier will tell you what the world looks like based on the 600 metres around him. You ask Lavoie, he'll tell you what the world looked like, metaphorically speaking, in the area that's

around him. And you ask me, I'll tell you what it looks like from the bigger perspective. So, the intelligence I was receiving, and also the information that I was receiving from my other task force commanders that were part of this battle – not just Lavoie – and talking to Afghans, we were ready. We were at the point where we could press this thing home. And yeah, we could have stuck to the plan, but again, you start to ignore the enemy, what he's doing, what intelligence is on the ground... And what people don't like at times or realize, is that the most important guy at this stage in the game happens to be the enemy on the ground, what's he doing, what's he telling you. And again, as much as I tried to phone the Taliban commander in Panjwayi at the time, he didn't seem to return my calls, so I wasn't getting perfect information. You know, they're not stupid these Taliban, and the Taliban had put a lot of their senior commanders on the ground. And we had a lot of commanders on the ground there, and a number of foreign fighters, because this was their main effort for 2006.

DAY: As I've discovered, there were different opinions on that day about the prudence of speeding up the plan. Some had assessed that there was quite an enemy force on the other side of the river and they thought 48 hours of bombardment before crossing the river would be prudent. I understand there was hesitance to go across earlier than planned. How did you perceive their hesitance? What were you thinking then?

FRASER: Well, I mean I listened to what they had to say; I knew a lot of the enemy were there. But, you know, you do two more days of bombardment and how many people do you kill? How do you know that? You guess. And we'd been bombarding them for some time. And just bombardment alone. And again, do you fight the plan or do you fight the enemy? And the intelligence and everything that we had determined, including the fact that [Lavoie] had gotten across the river, gotten into Rugby, the fact that we were pressuring them with a task force to the south [meant] the time was right. And no matter if you went in on the 2nd, the 3rd, the 4th, the 5th or the 6th:, Guess what ladies and gentleman? It is a difficult thing to cross a river and go into a main defensive area where the Taliban were waiting

and wanting to fight on. It would have been gut-wrenching whatever date was picked to go across that river.

DAY: OK, so, I'll be honest with you. At the platoon level, people don't know why it was sped up 48 hours, but there was a suspicion that NATO command was pressuring it to be sped up for an information operations victory. That the faster the Canadians were seen to move into Rugby, the better it would be for NATO from an information operations standpoint. Did you feel any pressure from above to get this thing moving?

FRASER: There was pressure from every quarter. Now, the bottom line was, I told people above me that we were gonna play this the way we had intended to play this. It was going to take time and it took a long time. The information objective of letting the Canadians take this, first of all it wasn't just Canadians; yeah, they had the lion's share of the fight, but the other task forces did an awful lot, and so did the other members of the organization that fought here. But corporals and sergeants don't run brigades. Brigade commanders run brigades. And corporals and privates don't know what's happening at every hour of the day at the brigade level. And if you want corporals and privates to run brigades, then go get them to run brigades, but I was the brigade commander. The decision was 'We're gonna go in,' and 26 years of experience and seven different operations told me now is the time to go in there and finish this thing off."

DAY: Ok so the bottom line is that 48 more hours of bombardment wouldn't have ensured easier reception on Rugby?

FRASER: Not in my estimation, no. [Lavoie] had achieved initial success. He proved to me, coupled with the intelligence and with how everything else was going on around that area, up in the west, up in the north, that the time was right. Move in.

DAY: Kind of a prickly question, but I've heard several reports that [Lavoie] was very nearly relieved at this point? Is there any truth to that?

FRASER: No.

DAY: So there were no discussions of that nature?

FRASER: No.

DAY: Ok, because a lot of people heard yelling on the radio net and nobody was quite clear what was going on. So?

FRASER: This is not a normal activity to go out and fight somebody. You know, war is not easy. [Lavoie] and I had some pretty serious discussions. We were talking about the hardest fight either one of us had ever done in our military career and the strategic consequences of the fight were pretty significant too. So, you know, the fact that we could have a frank and open discussion attests to the level of trust and collaboration that we had, and we weren't afraid to speak our minds. And you need that because, as commanders, we are dealing with lives of soldiers and lives of Afghans. But were there some pretty heated discussions? Of course there were, because we were talking about making the big step to go across the river, metaphorically and literally, to finish off the Taliban.

DAY: OK, well, these rumours are out there so it's good to get that cleared up. So after the 3rd, the 4th sees the friendly fire incident that changes the axis of attack from the south to the north.

FRASER: Well, first of all, Lavoie and I talked a lot after that friendly fire incident. I actually flew Lavoie into my headquarters so we could determine when we were going to cross the river. We changed the plan because it was a significant event that day. And I used it as an opportunity to make the Taliban believe that we were going to continue to cross the Arghandab as they thought we would. And then move Lavoie to the north and have him come from the north to the south in an area the Taliban didn't think we would come from. That's where task force Grizzly came into play, where they took the remnants of Charles Company, gave them some

snipers, gave them some people controlling direct fire and close air support, and I said to Steve Williams, I said, 'I want you to make yourself look like a thousand-man organization, make the Taliban believe you are still Omer Lavoie.' While Lavoie goes to the north and takes out the objectives from the north, putting more pressure on the Taliban. And that's what we did for the next three to four days. And we kept squeezing the Taliban from three different directions.

You know, everybody wanted to fight the plan, but at the end of the day we only lost four soldiers. So as much as people didn't want us to go, the results proved themselves.

DAY: Yeah, but from the details of that battle on the 3rd – I've interviewed now eight people who were in it – it was pretty horrific for them. They were caught in a U-shaped ambush and totally overwhelmed; and there was some pretty serious chaos on the ground there for a little bit. So they were asking, 'Why the hell were we over there? We should have been pounding them from the other side of the river for the next few days.'

FRASER: Yeah but guess what? You pound them for the next couple of days, but they were hiding in holes. It would not have made any difference. You can argue that, but here's the other thing that I think the soldiers have to give themselves more credit for: they got across the river! They were in the position, they succeeded. So the Taliban weren't going to roll over and let them scratch their bellies and say, 'Come in and get us.' This was the Taliban's main defensive fight that they wanted, and the fact that Lavoie's guys got across indicates that we had it. The intelligence that was coming out from other areas was that we had actually psychologically weakened the Taliban to the point that now was the time. And here's the other thing; had we stopped for three or four days to pound them a little bit harder, the Taliban probably could have gotten psychologically buoyed from the fact that they repulsed an attack and got three days to recuperate before we came at them again, because we were really pounding them for sometime before the 3rd.

[Long discussion of task force generation, big picture Afghan developments, etc.]

DAY: Ok, thank you very much.

FRASER: Alright, and I've got a question coming back for you.

DAY: Yeah, sure.

FRASER: Where are these rumours coming from about Lavoie?

DAY: Well most of the stuff I'm talking about was overheard on the radio by hundreds of people, which is how the rumours started I'd guess. But it was basically just a lot of heated conversations between you and Lavoie.

FRASER: Well, all I will tell you is that this is hard stuff. A lot of people can tell you all the theory, but reading about counter-insurgency, reading about exploiting, reading about an assault water crossing? It's easy to read; it's a lot harder to do. Lavoie done good; he had a hard job to do, as did every one of his soldiers. So hey, he's still there; what's important is what effects did he achieve and what effects did we achieve? And the facts on the ground speak for themselves. He succeeded in Panjwayi; we succeeded in defeating the Taliban. And he's still there, so God bless Omer Lavoie.

DAY: I think part of it is people looking for reasons about why the plan was abandoned in order to launch such a hasty attack.

FRASER: Here's the other thing I think Canadians have got to appreciate: you don't ever have 100 per cent intelligence, ok? Metaphorically speaking on a good day I would get 20 per cent. You can follow all the theoretical lines of A through Z of all the things you have to do, but at the end of the day, you fight an enemy and you gotta work in a truncated world and this is hard stuff. No one said that we were gonna get attacked on the morning of the 4th with an American aircraft; it wasn't the pilot's intent to

do that. But guess what guys? It is what it is; you get on with it and you move on. And again, I appreciate what they see in their world around them, but at the end of the day, results on the ground, the facts support everything that we said we needed to do and what we did. And I just think Canadians should just get our heads out of our navel and start looking at what we actually achieved, which is pretty significant.

It was NATO's largest operation ever. It's not about a Canadian battle-group, this was a Canadian-led brigade. I'm still a Canadian. As to this focus on [Lavoie] and [Hope], yeah, they're important; but guys, Canada was on show here internationally as the leader; it wasn't Dave Fraser, it was foreign affairs, it was CIDA (The Canadian International Development Agency); Canada led this operation, Canada led the brigade attack; it was a Canadian brigade.

DAY: Good point, I'll note that for sure.

FRASER: So everybody should take heart from what Canada was able to achieve.

CHAPTER EIGHT

YOU CAN'T WIN WITH BULLETS ALONE: CIMIC OPERATIONS IN BAZAAR-E-PANJWAYI

In the early days of Canada's counter-insurgency effort in Kandahar province, the efforts of the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) were an oft-discussed topic in the media. While much of the focus on this period was on Medusa and the relatively high-intensity conflict going on in Panjwayi, the PRT was operational as well. Getting the PRT story was not easy – at the time it seemed more dangerous than embedding with the battle group – and while the story that resulted was more about policy than action, it was nonetheless interesting to get a behind-the-scenes glimpse of the battle for hearts and minds.[1]

[1] A similar version of this article was previously published in Legion Magazine.

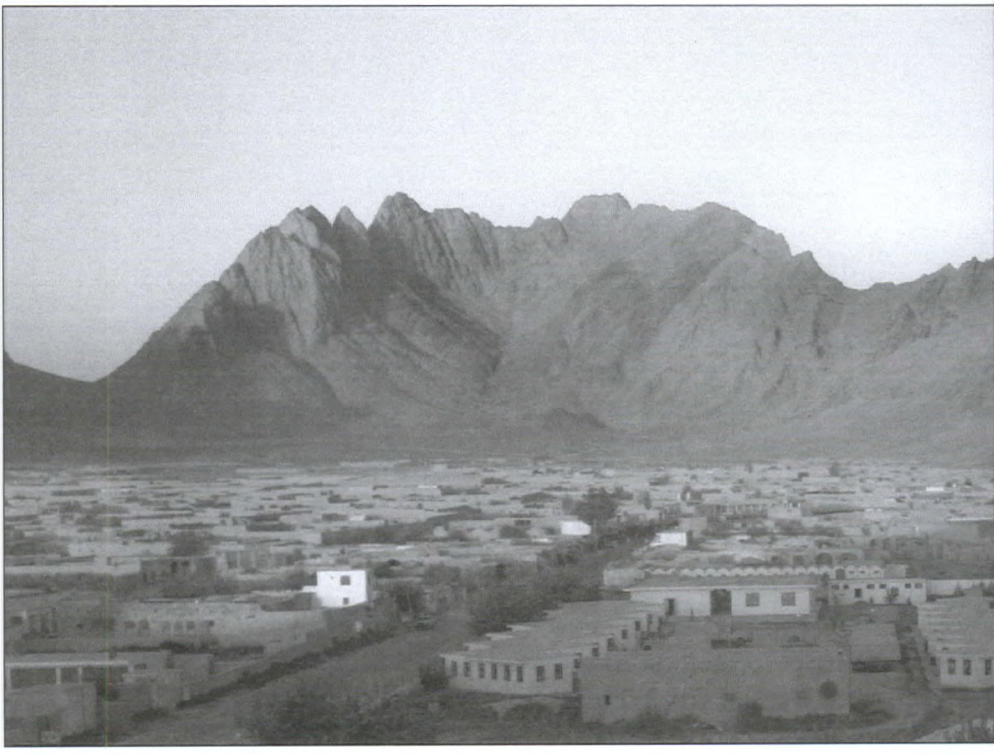
Canadian soldiers are fighting a war in Afghanistan.

In Spin Boldak, at the eastern edge of Kandahar province, the soldiers watch over the Pakistani border. At Forward Operating Base Martello, north of Kandahar city, they patrol the mountains. Across Panjwayi, southwest of Kandahar city, they rebuild after taking part in Operation Medusa, Canada's largest infantry battle since the Korean War.

Every morning, the soldiers wake up to fight the war. Not always in the sort of big deadly events that make the nightly news, but daily they dodge suicide bombers and rockets, they work to deliver aid to the needy and they try to win the trust of a wildly distrustful people. Their bravery is astounding and their battle is truly difficult.

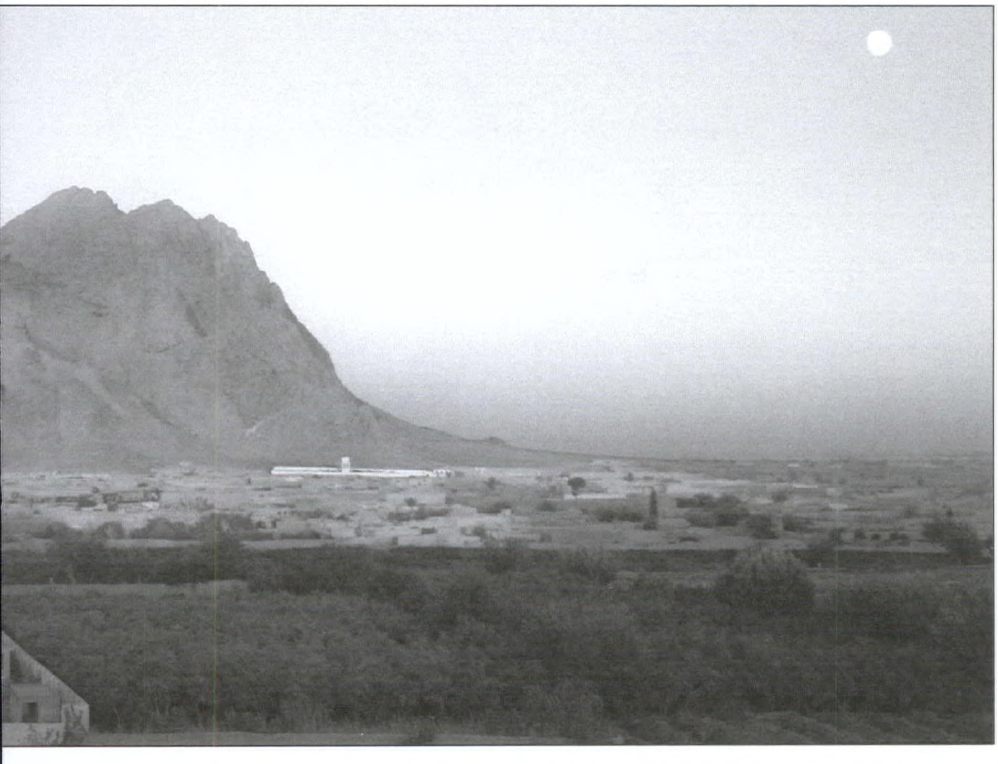
In the village of Bazaar-e-Panjwayi, Warrant Officer Dean Henley and Sergeant Chris Augustine fight their own quiet war. For all of this war's

The town of Bazaar-e-Panjwayi in September, 2006.



drama and violence, it may well be that theirs is the real battle. They operate a Civil-Military Co-operation (CIMIC) detachment and it's their job to win the trust and support of the villagers by doing good works. Their enemy is not merely the insurgents, but also corruption and bad governance.

Canada's Task Force Afghanistan is here as part of NATO ISAF, which includes more than 31,000 troops from 37 nations. The Canadian contingent is over 2,000 strong. The main battle group based at Kandahar Airfield comes largely from 2 Mechanized Brigade Group in Petawawa, Ontario, while the PRT, based at Camp Nathan Smith in Kandahar city, is comprised of 220 soldiers drawn from across the Canadian Forces and includes representatives from CIDA, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP).



The trip into Panjwayi was marked by these little roadsigns.

Afghanistan is one of the world's most dangerous places. As of November 2006, it had taken the lives of 42 Canadian soldiers and one diplomat. In fact, the country has a long history of repelling foreign soldiers. The British fought three colonial wars to try to gain control of this landlocked, central Asian country. The first, from 1839 to 1842, ended in utter disaster; the second, from 1878 to 1880, didn't end well either; and the last, in 1919, resulted in Afghanistan's total independence from Britain. For the next 60 years, Afghanistan was largely stable and independent – even becoming a destination for western tourists in the 1960s – at least until the Soviets invaded in 1979.

Though it took a decade of grinding, western-backed guerrilla war, the Afghan freedom fighters finally expelled the Red Army in 1989. The Soviet Union collapsed soon after. But Afghanistan collapsed too. Unable to find any agreeable method of power-sharing, the two major ethnic groups – Tajiks in the north and Pashtuns in the south – spent pretty much the whole next decade engaged in civil war against each other and among themselves.

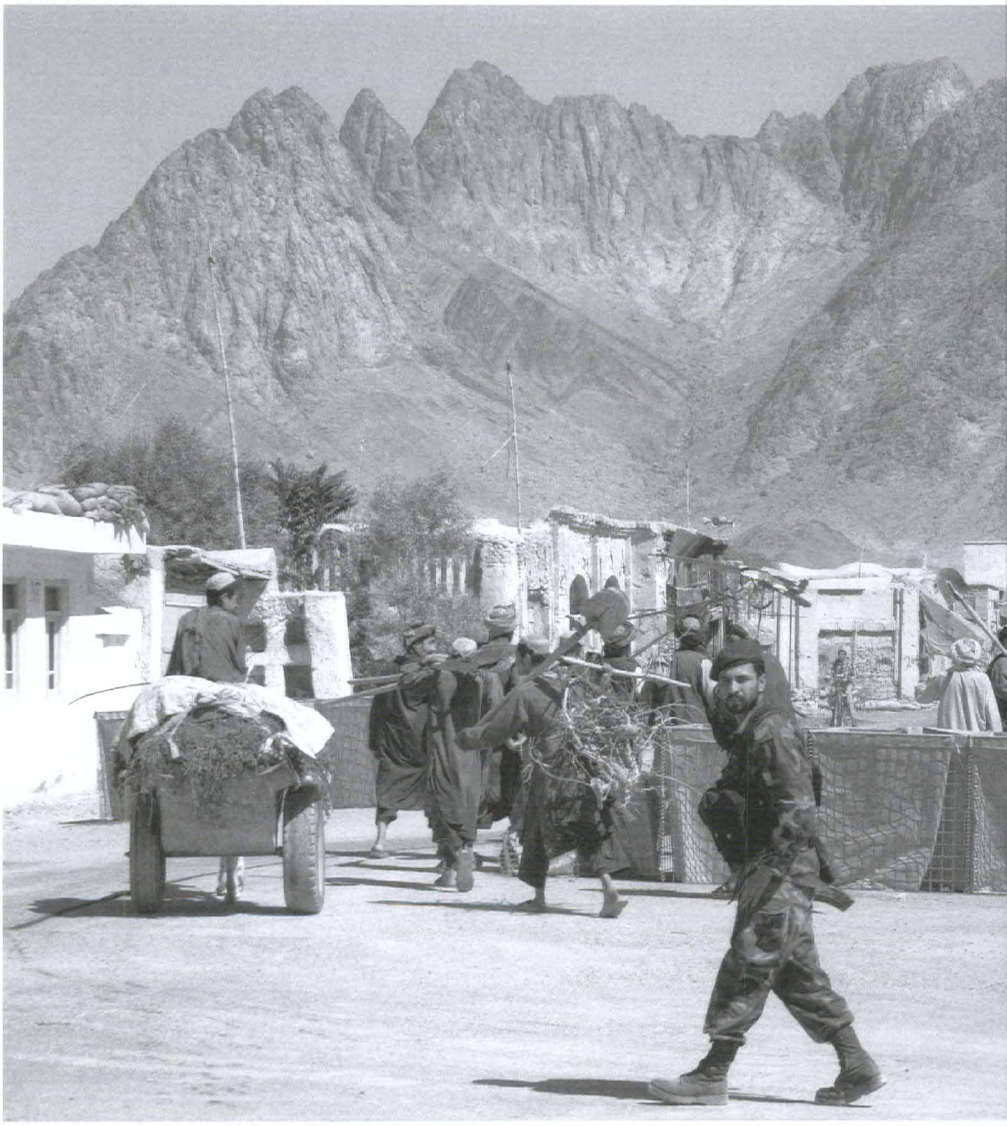
In the mid-1990s, however, a group of Pashtun religious students called Talibs, meaning 'seekers of knowledge', began to gain power in the area around Kandahar. The Taliban quickly grew stronger and more popular as they clamped down on bandits and created a general sense of security – something the Afghan people hadn't seen in a very long time.

Unfortunately, the Taliban were also Islamic fundamentalists who attempted to enforce absolute control over personal, economic and political life in Afghanistan. Furthermore, they were deeply intolerant, regularly committed savage human rights violations and they didn't care much for the international rule of law, either.

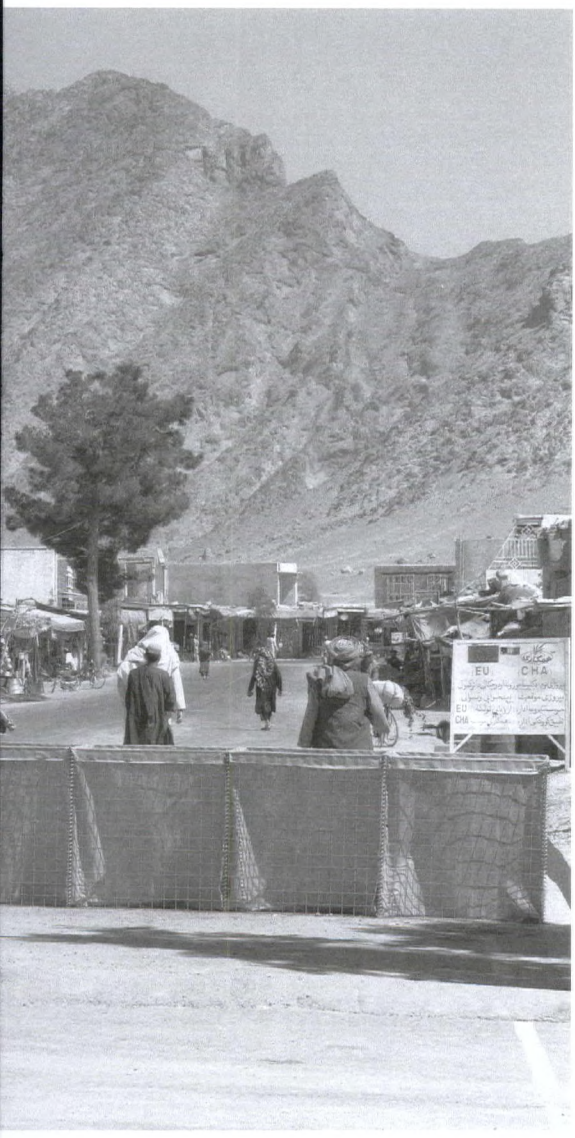
By the time September 11, 2001 rolled around, the Taliban had gained control of almost the entire country, with just a small group called the Northern Alliance, largely Tajik, hanging on in the area north of Kabul, the country's capital.

The Canadian Forces are now in Afghanistan not just because the Taliban were sheltering Osama bin Laden and allowing his al-Qaeda terrorist organization to use the country as a training base, but because they refused to stop doing so, even after 9/11. Now that the Taliban has scattered, the struggle is to build a stable and secure Afghan nation that no longer poses a threat to global security.

"This is a country that allowed extremist terrorists to come in, set up and then attack Western countries," explains Colonel Fred Lewis, the mission's deputy commander. "Luckily a whole bunch of Canadians weren't killed (on 9/11), but more than 30 were. So, that's point number one: this is about Canada's security. Then, point number two is that we are a country that has always exported its values. I don't mean imposing a culture on somebody, but just exporting its values in a good way, whether that was peacekeeping, or whether it was development work in the Third World; whether it was World War I or World War II. This is the same thing."



This is not a limited effort. It is a historical first for NATO to gather the alliance for such a large operation in an area so far removed from the North Atlantic. In Canada, much of the news is naturally focused on the Canadian contribution, but on the ground in Kabul or even walking around Kandahar Airfield, the sheer variety of international soldiers is amazing. There are French commandos, Dutch airborne troops, U.S. Green Berets, Danish gunners, Turkish infantry and British Marines. But that's not all;



An Afghan soldier in downtown Bazaar-e-Panjwayi, September, 2006.

there are Lithuanians, Irish, Icelanders, Belgians, Bulgarians, Australians, Swiss, Swedes, Norwegians, New Zealanders and many more, too.

In much of Afghanistan, the NATO mission is going quite well. In the last few years, Kabul has developed dramatically. The economy is booming and the streets are packed with vendors, business people and uniformed schoolchildren. In the north the situation is largely stable, employment

Warrant Officer Dean Henley and Sergeant Chris Augustine meet with Afghan elders in Bazaar-e-Panjwayi in October, 2006.

rates are high and there's little violence. The west of the country isn't doing badly either. But the south, well, that's a different story.

The current fighting in the south could be seen, at least in part, as a continuation of the civil war that started during the 1990s and never really finished.

The enemy is made up of Taliban, disgruntled warlords, drug smugglers, bandits and, to a much smaller degree, Islamic militants from across the Middle East and North Africa.

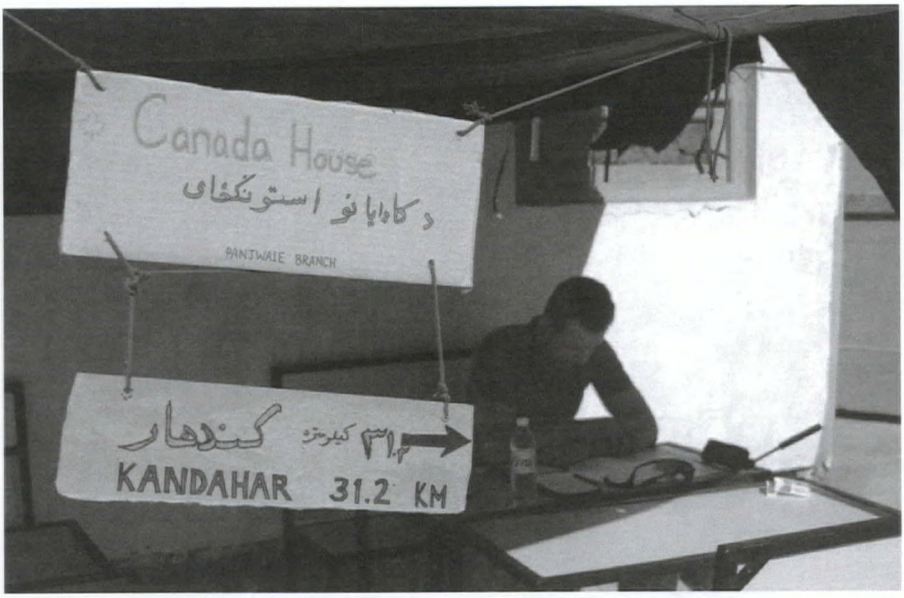
"There are the hard-line Taliban, who are extremists, almost like al-Qaeda guys," says Lewis. "Then there are what we're calling the 'day fighters,' guys who get recruited and paid to fight for the Taliban. Basically, the enemy is anyone who will be disadvantaged by having a properly functioning government in Afghanistan."

In a conventional war the military objective is usually quite clear: use overwhelming firepower to destroy enemy forces and hold or capture territory. But that is not the case in Kandahar province where success or failure depends, much like in a democracy, on the will of the people. If too many Afghans begin to believe their interests are better served by the Taliban, no amount of force will be enough to make it otherwise.

It is for this reason that the military objective for both sides in Afghanistan is to gain the support of the population. Firepower, even military strength, is of limited use. In this battle for the people, the Taliban have a huge tactical advantage because, quite simply, they are locals – they speak the same language as the villagers, they have the same history, they are often related by blood. In the Fall of 2006, this struggle for the support of the people was the real battle taking place in Kandahar province.

Warrant Officer Henley and Sergeant Augustine are on the front lines of that battle. A reservist from the Gray and Simcoe Foresters in Barrie, Ontario, Henley's job in Afghanistan is detachment commander for one of several CIMIC teams based out of the PRT at Camp Nathan Smith in

Reporting on the war is not simple. Keeping equipment working in the field can be difficult.



Warrant Officer Dean Henley at his headquarters in Panjwayi in October 2006.

Kandahar city. Augustine, a reservist from Princess of Wales Own Regiment in Kingston, Ontario, is second-in-command of the CIMIC detachment, which numbers well under 20 guys.

It's their job to go out into the villages and find out what the Canadians can do to help. "You can't win the insurgency by killing insurgents," says Henley. "You can't kill the insurgency, you have to take away its support base. It's the only way."

In September and October 2006, Henley and his team were based in Bazaar-e-Panjwayi, south of Kandahar. The little market town is just a few kilometres from the Pashmul area, where Operation Medusa was fought. It is by no means a safe area.

The team lives in a high school compound inside a cleared-out classroom. The conditions are rough, most particularly the bathroom arrangements which consist of a steel chair with a hole cut in it and a toilet seat glued to the top. If you have to go, you pick up the chair and walk into the field. But watch out for landmines. "People are now recognizing the CIMIC

detachment as a positive source for the village. We're hiring a lot of people as day labourers," says Henley. "You can see the difference; they may not necessarily like me but they like what I'm doing. As long as they realize I'm out here to help them. I think it's just a slow process."

On Thursday, October 5, 2006, Henley and Augustine hold a large town meeting across the road from their schoolyard base. More than 45 local elders, mullahs and leaders show up to talk and listen. The room quickly gets hot and crowded. The CIMIC security force stands guard around the perimeter.

Henley and Augustine don't have the authority to make promises or hand out money on the spot, but they will listen to all the issues and take notes, copious notes. They begin by speaking to the group. "We can't promise to solve all the problems in Panjwayi," Augustine tells them. "We'll do our best, but the real change has to come from all of you."

"And we can't do anything without security," says Henley. "If people are trying to kill us or blow us up, then we can't help."

One of the oldest men present – tall with a white flowing beard – stands up to assure Henley that so long as they are helping, they will be safe. It's a good start.

Over the next hour or so the villagers take turns listing the things they want the Canadians to fix. Almost all of them are mosque repairs, additions or renovations, including a request to complete the construction of a local mosque that was started by the Taliban but only half-finished. Augustine and Henley exchange a quick glance after this one.

Once the requests are in, they begin a question-and-answer session which very quickly goes off course when Augustine asks the crowd if they are satisfied with the distribution of humanitarian food supplies. What starts as three or four people talking at once turns into about 15 minutes of sustained shouting. After a few minutes even the interpreter stops trying to keep up.

Warrant Officer Dean Henley and Sergeant Chris Augustine distribute pay to local Afghan workers in Bazaar-e-Panjwayi in October, 2006.

The people are livid. The problem is that the hungry villagers aren't actually receiving the food. One man stands up: he swears that 99 per cent of the food is being stolen and sold for profit. The rest of the men nod in agreement.

It turns out that someone in the chain of authority is diverting the food for his own purposes. Another man stands up: "The government and the agencies must change the way this is being done, or they must stop giving this aid."

Another man stands up to deliver a blunt warning: "We are in the middle, we aren't with the Taliban and we aren't with the government. If you help us we will be with you. And if not ...."

Over the course of an hour the villagers hash out a new plan to circumvent the corrupt officials by distributing food through the area mosques, of which there are about 65. All of the people present agree: everyone trusts the clerics who run the mosques; they will be fair.

Henley and Augustine don't automatically agree to the plan, which turns out to be wise, but they do pledge to do their best.

With the uproar subsided, another elderly man stands up: "The solution for every problem in this area is to do this," he gestures to the room and the crowd, "listen to the people. If you really want peace and security, just listen to the people, because the leaders are just here to steal."

After the meeting, Henley and Augustine return across the street to their compound where they begin to draw up a plan. One of the first things to do is report back to PRT headquarters and fill them in on what they'd learned. The conversation with his operations officer doesn't go well. "The people are very upset about the food distribution. It's a swaying factor. If we get the food to the right people, they love us; if we don't, then we're creating a whole lot of angry people," Henley says into the satellite phone.

In one sense, the whole effort to rebuild Afghanistan comes down to this. The battle group and all the PRT staff are all here to make it possible for these two reservists to connect with Afghans, make some positive changes in their lives and thereby gain their trust. But there's a problem. Henley makes his point more emphatic. "The system is failing," he tells his operations officer. "We're going to create 10,000 angry people that are going to turn against us."

Despite the blunt warning, it's not an easy sell. The old system may be corrupt, but the mechanisms are already in place. Henley is told that circumventing those mechanisms may undermine confidence in the government. This is hard to understand, because a lack of confidence in the government is exactly what led to the problem.

However, as PRT commander Lieutenant-Colonel Simon Hetherington later points out, there are some other factors to think about. "I've been burned several times by groups saying they represent the people of the region when in fact they don't, I later learn," says Hetherington. "I have one choice and that is to support the legitimate government of Afghanistan."

Hetherington confirms what Henley discovered. The food cannot be distributed through the mosques.

So, despite the setback, Henley and Augustine begin planning how to start their mosque repairs, already looking forward to new and different ways to prove to the villagers that the Canadians really do want to help. Plus, they haven't given up trying to get food to the hungry. "I think what we'll try to do is work with that government approach, but if we identify that there are people in need that aren't getting stuff, then we'll try to augment that system. Hopefully that doesn't undermine the efforts of the government. But at the same time we don't want to disgruntle fairly fragile populations in a region where we're working," says Augustine. "We'll see how persuasive we can be," he adds with a wry grin.

Standing in Panjwayi, it's hard not to feel the weight of history. The enemy won't stop and they won't go away; one way or another they'll have to be dealt with. But, as Colonel Lewis says, just because it's hard doesn't mean it's not the right thing to do. "There are truly evil people in this world. And I think that sometimes Canadians can be very naïve, because of the country we live in. I think sometimes Canadians ... they don't experience enough of the world. They say, 'No, no ... just let the Afghans sort their own problems out.' Well, you know what? They can't, because there are evil people that won't let them sort it out."

If you wish, there is ample evidence to show that almost everyday some part of Afghanistan gets a little worse – violent deaths have increased every year since 2001, as has drug production, for example. However, you can also see it another way. From the reborn Kabul to the functioning democratic government, to the small victories Canadian soldiers achieve over enemy forces almost every day; there are many signs of success too.

In the end, Afghanistan is big enough and wild enough to contain almost any perceptions. It may be that Afghanistan is getting better and worse at the same time. If that's true, it would be because this right now is the middle of the fight. Not the beginning and certainly not the end, but the messy part in between, where nothing is certain.

But there is a larger picture too. If you hang out on any big ISAF base in Afghanistan you'll see soldiers from many countries – Germans, Austrians, Estonians, Latvians, Macedonians, Italians, Croatians and Czechs – and they're all working together, fighting together in many cases, to prevent the resurgence of a kind of totalitarian thinking that we've all agreed is the enemy, a kind of thinking that doesn't belong in the future.

If one thing is clear in Afghanistan, it's that the world has come a long way since the early part of the 20th century. It wasn't too long ago that many of the countries here were fighting world wars to prevent this same kind of thinking from taking over.

Now, that fight is largely over and there aren't many bad guys left. The few that do remain are trapped in the world's dusty corners, hiding in mountain caves or living disguised among the villagers. It's a tough battle, it won't be quick and victory isn't guaranteed, but NATO is clearing them out. Canadians are leading the fight.

In the village of El-Bak just outside FOB Martello.

CHAPTER NINE

GHOSTS IN THE HILLS: EARLY COUNTER-INSURGENCY OPERATIONS IN SHAH-WALI-KOT

Early into the second rotation into Kandahar, the Canadian leadership was still struggling to define the scope of the threat and the difficulty of the task they'd been given. While much later on it became very clear that we didn't have enough troops on the ground to have the desired impact on Kandahar province, at this early date the idea that we needed more troops to do the job wasn't accepted.[2]

[2] A largely similar version of this article was published in Legion Magazine in January, 2007.

In the mountains around Forward Operating Base Martello, the enemy are like ghosts; they hide among the villagers and emerge for battle only when and where they choose. Mostly they stay out of sight, firing their mortars and rockets from a distance. Sometimes though, they attack in force.

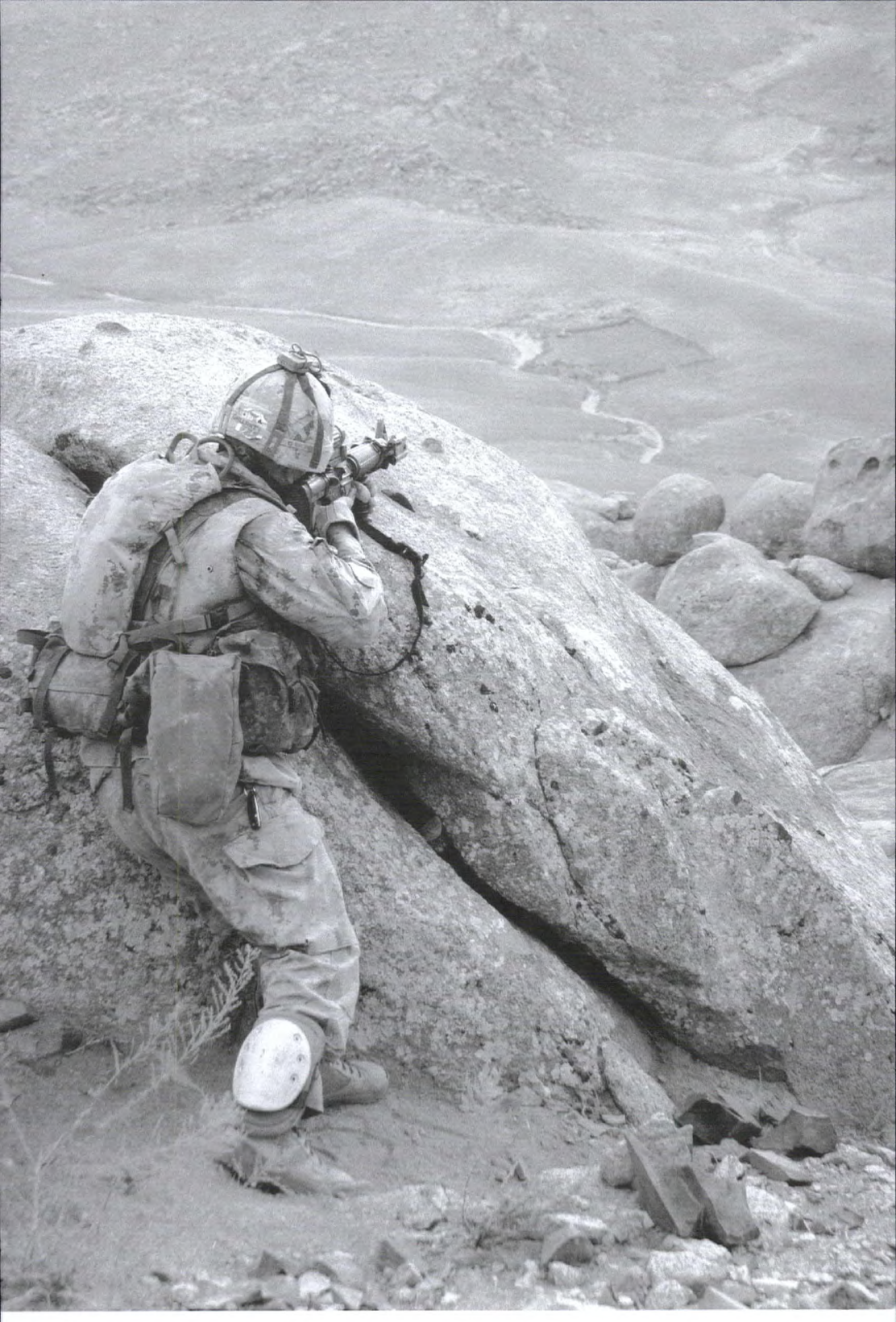
Just after dark, on September 4, 2006, roughly 80 of them materialized out of the mountains and assaulted Martello, a Canadian base well north of Kandahar, Afghanistan. From high ridges on three sides they opened up with mortars, rockets and heavy machine-guns. For the first hour or so it looked bad. Everyone was pinned down and the enemy was closing in. An attack this big and this well co-ordinated was a surprise – the enemy was trying to overrun the base.

At the time of the attack, Martello was being held by a small group of Canadian soldiers and a large force of Dutch air assault infantry. The Dutch were filling in for the Canadian task force that was pulled down to Panjwayi to take part in Operation Medusa, a huge offensive in the region south of Kandahar city.

But in late September, with Medusa complete, the Canadians returned to Martello with the intention of reasserting control over the now unruly area. This is the story of their first four days back at the base.

Martello sits on a plateau above the village of El Bak, alongside the thin road leading from Kandahar to the city of Tarin Kot in Uruzgan province. It is at the far northern edge of the Canadian military's area of operations. The base is surrounded by mountain-sized piles of jumbled stones and jagged ridges. Everything is covered by a deep layer of the most unbelievably fine dust. Basically, the place feels like a construction site on the moon.

A Bravo Company soldier sights a suspected insurgent in the hills above FOB Martello.



El Bak, on the other hand, looks like the seventh century. It's a collection of mud compounds, irrigation ditches, footpaths and angry donkeys. The several hundred people who live in El Bak are not exactly friendly, but not openly hostile either. In the old Afghan tradition, they are hedging their bets, waiting to see which side gains the upper hand.

On Friday, September 29, just a few hours after the Canadian force arrived back at Martello, Dutch Battle Sergeant Major Frank (last name withheld) gave a detailed briefing on the events of the last several weeks. Standing up on the base's high point, Frank showed the group of Canadian soldiers where the enemy placed their guns and how the September 4 attack unfolded.

At about 6:45 p.m., the insurgents opened fire from three mountain ridges overlooking the camp. They attacked both the front and rear gates; they shot up the command post (CP) and the sleeping tents; and they targeted the fuel bladders and the observation posts (OPs).

During the early moments of the attack the camp was in chaos. The Dutch mortar positions were under heavy fire and could not respond. Since most of the insurgent firing positions were beyond the range of small arms, it was left to a couple of machine-gunners along the wall and a few Dutch armoured vehicles to fight off the attack.

At one point the insurgents advanced below the camp's northern OP and to within a few hundred metres of the camp perimeter.

The fight finally started to turn for the Dutch when one of their vehicles' cannons managed to take out the insurgents' main gun position, a 12.7 mm Russian heavy weapon at a point known as the Joshua Tree, which sits about 1,200 metres above the camp.

Corporal Al Hennessy of Bravo Company, Royal Canadian Regiment, was one of the Canadians at Martello during the attack. "I was just starting

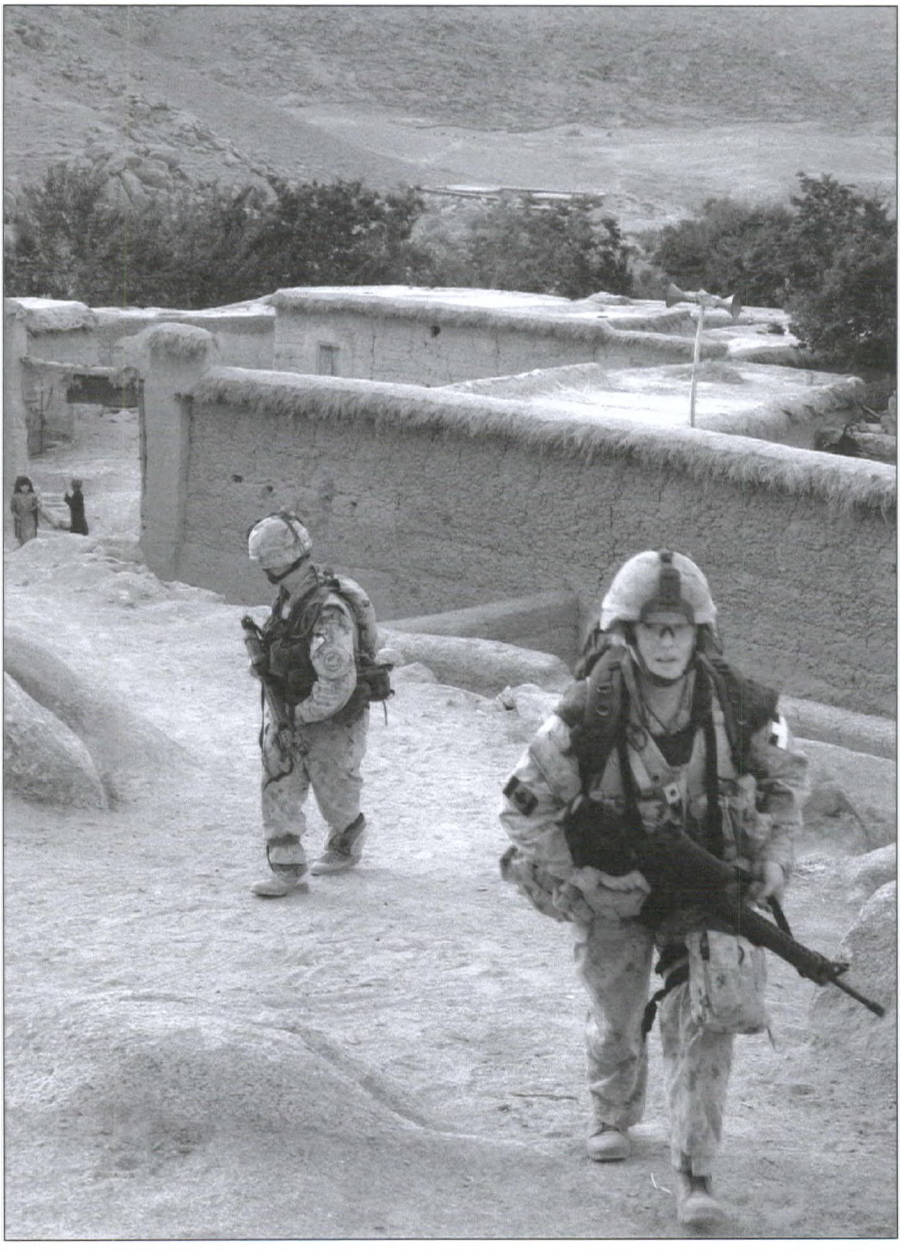
supper when the shit hit the fan. Bullets were hitting in back of us and all around. I immediately grabbed my kit. I don't like to use the words froze or whatever 'cause it was shock. I gathered everybody up – I had three Canadians and one Dutch guy – we got our kit on and went out the back of the tent. Bullets were flying everywhere. I saw a couple (of enemy fighters) stand up and fire rocket propelled grenades just by OP North. One of them blew up a truck in the parking lot."

In all, the battle lasted almost six hours. The attackers finally scattered for good when Dutch helicopter gunships joined the fight. Amazingly there were no allied casualties. Dutch sources report 10 Taliban fighters were killed. "Anybody that was here and says they weren't scared is lying," says Hennessy, "when you got bullets hitting all around you and you really don't know what way to go because you don't know where they're coming from. Until you experience it... you can hear the bullets hitting and whizzing. It's just a sickening feeling you get, to know you're getting fired on – that you might get hit."

On Saturday morning the Dutch begin to pull out, leaving the Canadians to fend for themselves. Bravo's company commander, Major Geoff Abthorpe, will be leaving too. Not that he wants to go, but on Friday, Bravo Company lost its first soldier when Private Josh Klukie died after stepping on a mine in Panjwayi. Abthorpe will go back to Kandahar to see him off.

"For the next day or so, this is the most vulnerable we're going to be," says Abthorpe, looking up at the hills. "They're watching right now and they see this huge convoy leaving and helicopters picking guys up. If they're going to hit us, test us, it's going to be in the next day or two."

When the Dutch leave, the place feels empty. The force now at the base – comprised mainly of RCR's Bravo Company and elements of 2 Royal Canadian Horse Artillery and 2 Combat Engineer Regiment – is barely enough to man all the defensive positions along the perimeter. A Canadian sergeant jokes that they should put stuffed dummies around the camp.



Corporal Janice Comeau leads the way on an arduous mountain foot patrol.

There is a definite manpower shortage. For example, by the end of their stay at Martello, the Dutch soldiers wouldn't patrol outside the wire with fewer than 20 men. The Canadians will do it with far fewer than that. "We don't really have enough guys to send patrols out into the hills," says Abthorpe. "But on the other hand, we have to. If we don't, it gives them too much freedom to move. We have to project ourselves out into the hills to push them back."

On Saturday afternoon the first patrol heads outside the wire. It's tasked with climbing one of the nearby mountains – called Big Rock – to check for signs of enemy activity.

Leading the patrol are Warrant Officer Jim Murnaghan and Sergeant Mark Gallant, two old friends who turn out to have an unusual ability to say funny things in pretty much any situation. That's not to say they aren't tough leaders, however, because whenever Murnaghan gives an order his troops respond as if he had directly yanked on their brainstem.

Three infantry soldiers from Bravo Company are coming too – Corporals Joey Chow and Brad Kilcup and Master Corporal Billy Cornish – along with two combat engineers – Sapper Matt Cloutier and Corporal Glen Warner – and a diminutive Scottish-Canadian medic from 2 Field Ambulance, Corporal Janice Comeau, who will carry almost 70 kilograms of gear up the mountain.

As the patrol heads out, the big M777 howitzers start blasting the hilltops around the base in a fierce show of force. After climbing for about an hour to get to the top of Big Rock, the patrol finds piles of enemy shell casings, probably left over from the September 4 attack.

From the top of the mountain, one of the guys spots a man hurrying down the valley, away from the patrol. It looks suspicious. Everyone spreads out and gets behind a rock or some other cover. "Can we get down that side?" Murnaghan shouts from one ridge over. "Joey, we gotta get down there fast. We're going to try to get that guy."

Warrant Officer Jim Murnaghan (left) watched for Taliban in the next valley.

Everybody starts looking for a way down the mountain. "Hey Jim, he just disappeared behind that mountain there," shouts Gallant. "There's a hill right here where the road is. If he comes out there, he won't see our approach and we can nab him on the other side."

"Yeah, but we need to get off this rock first," says Murnaghan.

"Yeah," Gallant replies.

With the man disappearing quickly, the patrol rumbles down the steep mountainside, scrambling over 10-foot-high rocks and jumping across big gaps. By the time the soldiers get down, the man is nowhere to be seen.

Murnaghan looks around. "He's already gone," he says, then shouts his orders. "All right, just grab some all-around defence, drink some water, and then we'll head on back."

The patrol spreads out across the small plateau. The setting sun bathes the whole place in a kind of orange glow. The sound of kids playing in the walled compounds below echoes up the valley. Everybody just sits and watches the village, waiting to see what will happen next.

Gallant goes down on one knee and stares across El Bak. "The Taliban shell the base all the time and these people must know what's going on," he says. "But these guys are just farmers, you know; they just want to farm and be left alone. Whoever puts a gun in their face they'll tell them what they want to know. We try to tell them that we're here to help out, to stop the Taliban, but it doesn't really sink in; they're hedging their bets."

Just then another Afghan comes around the corner of the mountain, a few hundred metres away. "There's a guy coming up over here – dressed in black. Could be a Jedi," Gallant shouts back to the group.

"Look out for his light sabre," replies Murnaghan.

Chow gets tasked to go out and intercept the man for a search. "We're going to get him to stop, lift his shirt, and then spin around," Murnaghan tells Chow.

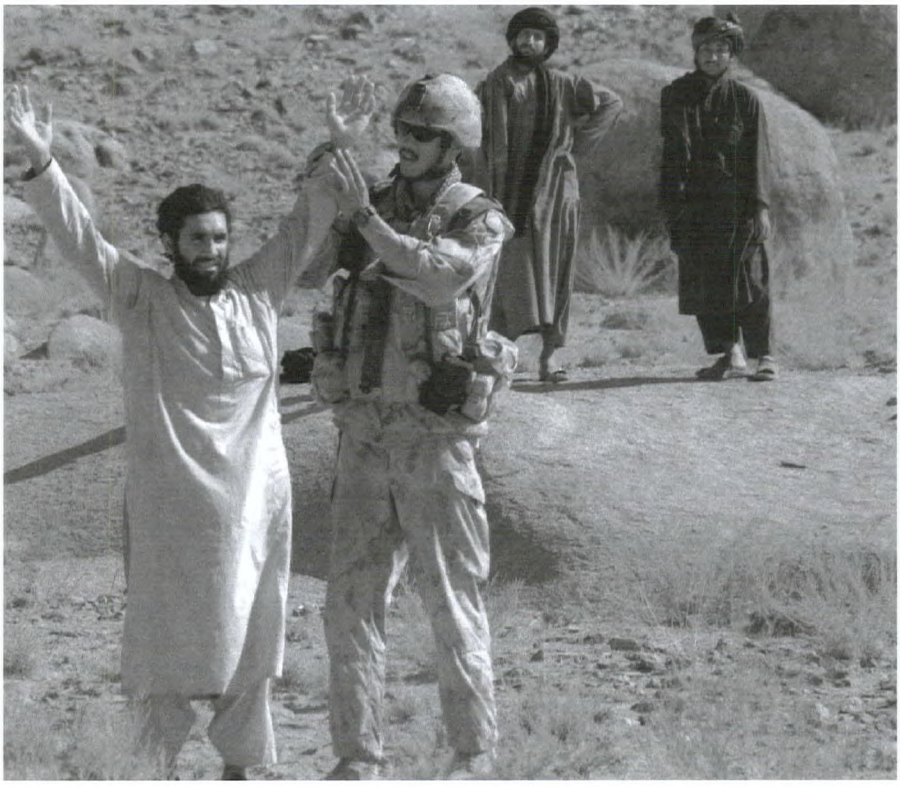
Without a word Chow moves forward. Murnaghan and the interpreter move in.

Murnaghan wants to know if the villager has seen any Taliban. The man says no, there's no Taliban around here. "Yeah there is. We seen them, we shot at them and we killed them," Murnaghan replies through his interpreter, referring to the September 4 attack. "They were on the other side, by the OP, climbing up the mountain. You're telling me no one in the village seen them come down through the wadi (dry creek bed) and start climbing up the hill? He never saw that?"

The man replies that they didn't see them because they were all in their houses. "Tell him if he does see Taliban, and then if he comes and tells me, I'll give him money."

The man doesn't seem too interested in the offer and he goes on his way. So does the patrol.

Back at Martello everybody cracks out the rations and has dinner. Luckily, there are some American and Dutch meals around, which are a nice change from the heavy Canadian meals. Life isn't too bad for the troops at the base. Though most of the tents have bullet holes in them, there are a couple of TVs and some older DVDs to watch. Not that the war doesn't provide enough entertainment, however. At night you can watch flares shoot up into the mountains, for example, or listen to the fighter jets circling overhead, or even get scared silly when the sudden firing of the big howitzers shakes your skull. It's no disco, but it's not bad.



Suspicious men were routinely searched, no insurgents detained. FOB Martello.

On Sunday morning, one day after resuming control of Martello, a mixed group of infantry, engineers and artillery strikes out on a patrol through El Bak up to Joshua Tree, the single lonely tree on a high rocky ridge overlooking the camp. It's quite a feeling to walk out the gate with 10 soldiers when there are 80 enemy fighters in the area capable of co-ordinated military action. The spectre of an ambush is not lost on anybody.

After going through the edge of El Bak, the patrol passes a series of marijuana fields then climbs a steep ridge and enters a wide, empty valley. Martello is out of sight. "Three guys coming towards us fast, coming down off the mountain," shouts Cornish.

"Engineers, up on that side. Kilcup and the guys up on this side," Murnaghan barks and the patrol spreads out, ready for whatever.

It is three young men with big beards and it's kind of strange for them to be way back here in the middle of nowhere. Chow goes forward to search them.

After the search Murnaghan moves in. He asks rapid fire questions through the interpreter. What are you doing back here? Where do you live? Where do you work? When did you start? What village again? Have you seen any Taliban?

The man says he hasn't seen Taliban in months.

The second man comes forward. He asks Murnaghan something first, "Why did you make me lift my shirt? Why did you search me?"

"Tell him we needed to make sure he didn't have any weapons or explosives tied to his body," says Murnaghan.

Again, the questions: Where are you going? Where do you live? Where do you work? What are you farming? Have you seen any Taliban? Have you seen any in El Bak? All the answers check out, but still no reports of Taliban activity. "Even when the camp got attacked he didn't see anybody?" asks Murnaghan, not expecting an answer. "No, eh? He probably didn't hear anybody either, right?"

"There's another two on the hill there," says Comeau in her Scottish accent. She crouches behind a boulder and brings her rifle up into the firing position. "They looked over and then they went back again," she shouts.

"Oh yeah?" Gallant shouts back. "The far hill or the near one?"

"The near one," Comeau replies. Gallant begins moving over. When he reaches Comeau's position, he crouches and brings his rifle up to spot through the scope.

"See those rocks straight ahead? To the left of there," explains Comeau.

As she and Gallant watch the mountains, Murnaghan finishes up with the three men and sends them on their way.

"Sergeant Gallant, we're moving out," he yells.

"Did you see those two guys who ducked behind the hill there, after they saw us?" asks Gallant.

"Yeah, they're probably long gone. Don't think we're running and catching them," replies Murnaghan.

Clearance patrol at FOB Martello.

Gallant kind of shrugs and looks at Comeau. "My heart's beating like a rabbit," he says.

She laughs gently and the patrol moves off up the next ridge, in the direction the men disappeared. A few hundred metres up the trail the patrol finds a cassette tape along the trail. "This is music for religious people," says the interpreter.

"It looks religious, there's tanks and missiles on it," says Murnaghan, referring to the cover of the tape, which does indeed have tanks and missiles on it.

"It must be Taliban. Most of it is songs for battle," says the interpreter.

"Motivating songs?" Murnaghan shakes his head. Everyone suspects that the three guys they just searched dropped it when they saw the patrol.

A few hundred metres later, the patrol finally reaches the ridgeline that leads to Joshua Tree and promptly takes a break.

While sitting on the ridge, an older woman and two children suddenly appear a metre away. She's questioned too. She says she's never seen any Taliban either.

"No Taliban in Afghanistan, eh?" grumbles Murnaghan. "All right, tell her to have a nice walk."

"There are no Taliban in Afghanistan, in case you are wondering," Murnaghan reports to the patrol. "I don't know why I came all the way here 'cause there's none here; which is funny, 'cause everybody looks like Taliban to me, even that old lady."

"There's someone else coming up the path," Comeau reports.

"We got one person coming up the trail," Gallant confirms.

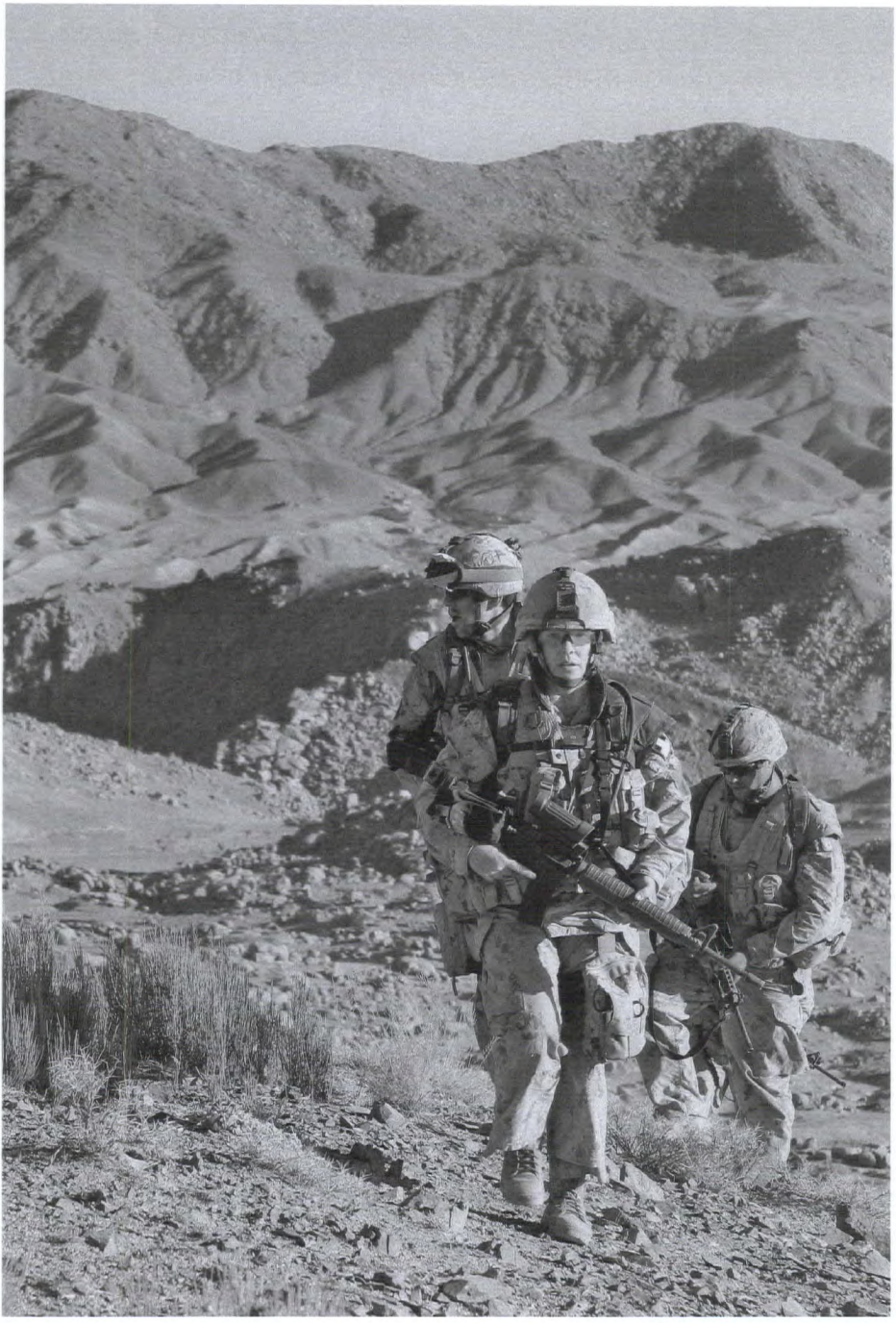
There's a distant speck on the valley floor. It must be the man Comeau saw. "I think he's just going to walk by," says Gallant, looking through his scope.

Sure enough, the man saw the patrol, paused and walked down the valley instead of coming up the ridge.

It doesn't faze Murnaghan, who lays in the dust peering over the ridge down into the next valley, a place he calls a major Taliban centre. "A lot of education I think is the key to getting rid of the Taliban," he says, periodically looking at distant targets through his scope. "The farmers don't know their options. You know what I mean, the villagers, they don't know their options. We're just another armed group like the Taliban. We need to show them that life can be better without the Taliban. We have to convince them there's another way.

"But it's hard 'cause when we leave, the Taliban slide in at night and force them to cough up food and stuff. And also, the Taliban are running around calling themselves mujahedeen, so they look like they're fighting occupiers. But we're not occupying, we're not removing anything from this country, except for body bags; that's the only thing we've brought out of here."

After clearing the area around Joshua Tree, the patrol heads back to Martello through the main part of El Bak. The town is very quiet. There are no children in sight. Villagers peak out of their doorways then quickly disappear. It makes everyone tense. "The people are so friendly here," one of the soldiers jokes, "at least in the sense that they don't try to kill us on sight, but instead have the basic decency to (plot) our deaths in the privacy of their own homes."



Corporal Janice Comeau high above FOB Martello.

Despite the sarcasm, there is an understanding that this is how the ghostly enemy operates: when questioned, they pretend to be friendly villagers, but once out of sight they resume their violent campaign.

Back inside the wire, one of Bravo's young leaders, Lieutenant Jeff Bell, describes the basic problem facing the soldiers at Martello. "Imagine you're one of those villagers and somebody tells you all these bad things about the foreigners, that we're here to steal their land and take their crops. Now imagine these foreigners come in, they look different, they don't speak the same language, they have a different faith, they have all sorts of strange equipment. And over the years they've seen this before, strange people come in and slap them around and tell them what to believe. You wouldn't know who to trust. That's why we've basically got to teach them how to learn. So they can form their own opinions about things, then they can make up their own minds about what they want their country to be like.

"We're not bad people in the classical sense. I don't mean to sound bitter or anything but the Taliban view us as the enemy. I'm sure most of them really believe that they're the good guys, doing good for the country, and we're the bad occupiers trying to force something on the people. But we're not. I mean, we're not here to take this patch of land on the side of a mountain, we're just trying to help them."

Just before lunch on Monday the sound of a loud, but distant, explosion echoes through the valley. In a place like this, distant explosions aren't unusual and nobody really stops to think too hard about it.

A few moments later a couple of guys are getting coffee. "Was that the engineers?" one of them asks. "No, somebody said it came from up behind Joshua Tree. There's smoke up there," the other replied.

Sure enough, it was clear to see there was smoke coming from behind the tree. It was an interesting mystery – what could it be? Maybe it was an old

mortar or a stray shell or something.

In retrospect, it was a pretty clear sign that the base was under attack.

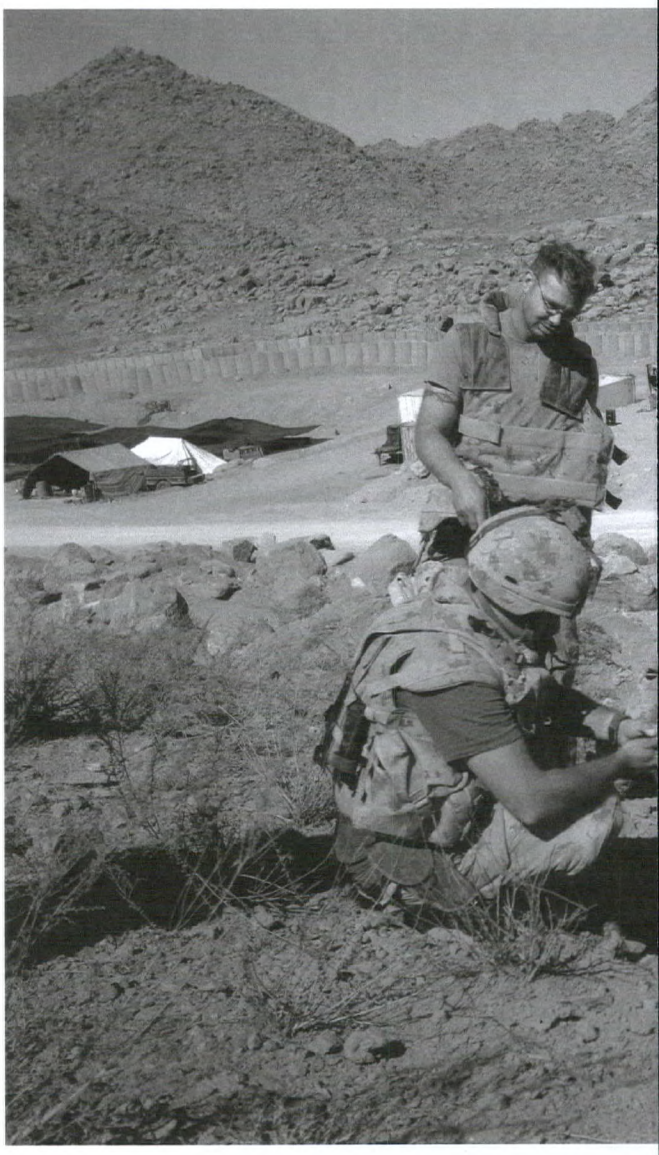
While staring up at the tree, absorbed in the mystery, the second rocket screeches overhead and slams into the soft ground 20 metres from the command post. It was a 107 mm high-explosive rocket weighing nearly 20 kilograms and travelling several hundred kilometres an hour. The sound it makes coming in is vicious and very real.

In what seems like half a heartbeat, before the dirt and rocks finish falling out of the sky, all hell breaks loose. Canadian heavy machine guns begin hammering the area around Joshua Tree while soldiers sprint in every direction, away from the blast, toward their guns, toward cover.

Bell runs by already covered up in full battle gear. "Down, down, get down," he yells. But it's hard to find any good cover. The fortifications here are only half complete. Reaching better cover requires a 200-metre sprint across open ground. More rockets could be seconds away and this is not a really good place to be. Just then, Cloutier yells from a nearby Nyala armoured vehicle. "Get in here, get in, get in," he screams through the hole in the three-inch-thick passenger-side window. It's a quick run and a scramble up through the back door into the relative safety of the Nyala, where Cloutier and a group of engineers have taken shelter. These guys were working just metres from the rocket's path; it pretty much flew right over their heads and landed close, too. They're all chattering, high on the adrenalin of a near miss.

"Holy f–k that came straight in off the ridge," says one. "It was close. It was close. It was close," chants another.

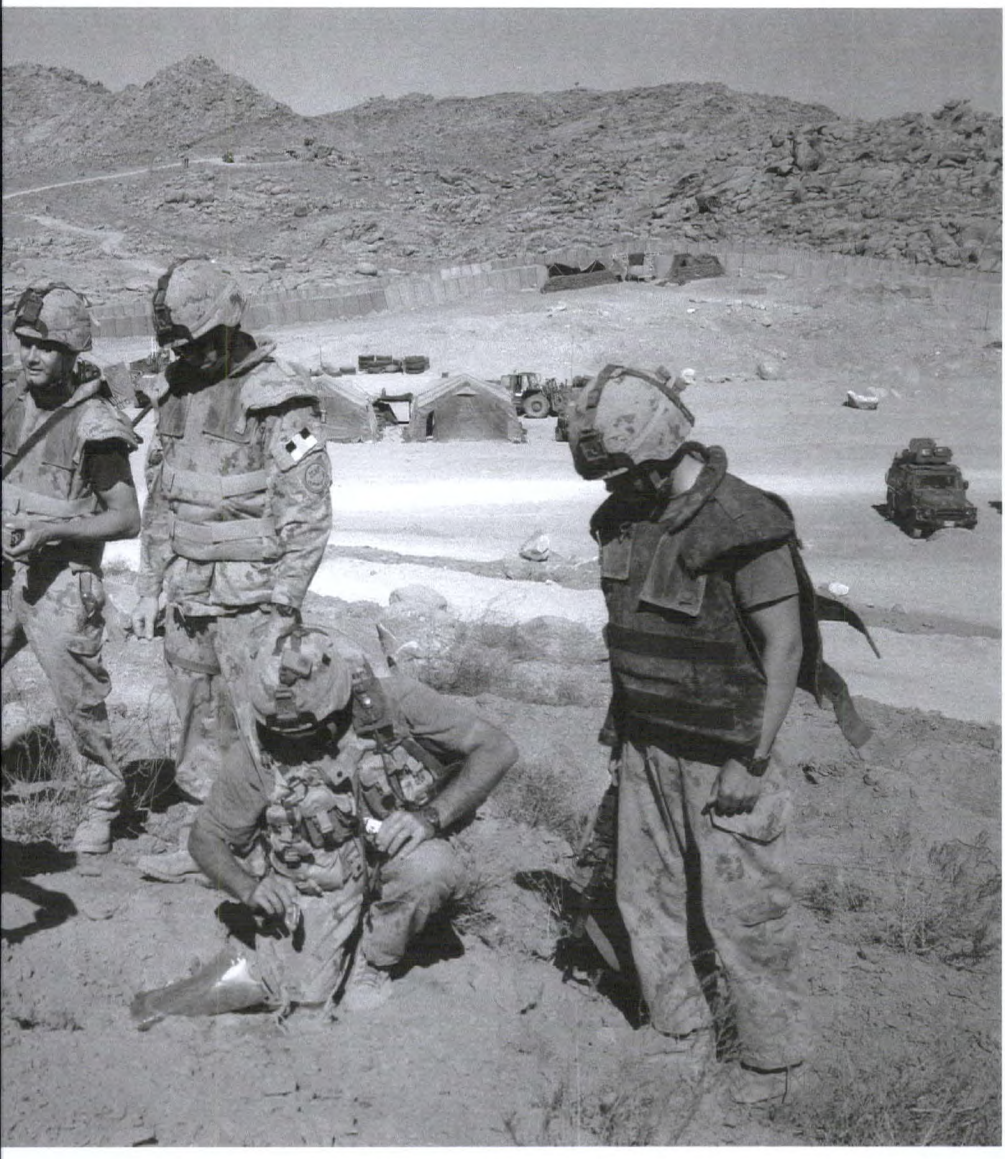
Warner is on the Nyala's automatic gun system scanning across the ridge, looking for the enemy. "Scan and breathe, scan and breathe," says another engineer. "Where there's one ... there's another."



Soldiers crowd around one of the shell holes after the rocket attack at Martello, October 2006.

Boom. Another rocket hits maybe 100 metres away. Flying stones rattle off the Nyala's heavy armour.

Crack-crack-crack. It's the 81 mm mortars returning fire, all four tubes blasting. The ridge around Joshua Tree erupts into flame and smoke as the big rounds impact fast and hard. "F–k 'em up," Cloutier whispers as the mortars land one after another.



It's all quiet for a few minutes. The Nyala is facing the ridge head on and all eyes are on Joshua Tree, waiting to see if another rocket is inbound. The feeling is that the Nyala is pretty safe, but a direct hit wouldn't be good for anybody.

Bell appears at the back door of the Nyala. He's been out running back and forth across the base checking positions since the attack began.

"They're probably either gone or dead, but we're waiting for the air support to get here and do their thing. Then we'll call the all-clear."

Two hours pass. Finally a Dutch fighter jet shows up and does three high-speed runs across the ridges, dropping flares from its belly. "Did they send that thing from Holland?" jokes one of the soldiers.

It turns out that the mystery explosion up at Joshua Tree was the first enemy rocket – fired from the ridge beyond – falling short. The next two were direct hits on the base, while a fourth sailed long. A few minutes after the all-clear Murnaghan starts gathering soldiers to go up to Joshua Tree to check things out and look for the enemy. The climb up is determined and fast. Everyone seems to have a sense of purpose, if not anger. When the patrol is two ridges away from Martello the big guns open fire on a distant mountain; everyone jumps, but it's just another show of force.

A quick tour around Joshua Tree reveals nothing more than a whole lot of new shell holes. Whoever launched the rockets seems to have gotten away without consequence. The patrol hurries back to base before dark.

It is another patrol without any sign or word of the enemy. All the villagers once again said they knew nothing. But despite their lack of co-operation, Murnaghan doesn't seem to fault the villagers for their position. They're in a tough spot and it's hard to blame them for putting their own safety first.

"Did the Dutch send 80 guys to climb these ridges and attack themselves? I don't think so," says Murnaghan. "No, I don't trust their (the villagers) answers; they're trying to stay safe at any cost. But I don't think they trust me either. I think the country's been in turmoil for so long that trust like we think about it would be kind of foolish here."

It appears to be a classic catch-22: the security situation around Martello won't improve until people start giving Murnaghan information about enemy fighters; but the people won't trust Murnaghan until they feel safe

from reprisal by enemy fighters, which won't happen until Murnaghan gets information. The fighters, meanwhile, have all the time in the world to cajole new recruits and plot their battles.

Though many of the soldiers at Martello believe the way out of this trap is through education – essentially showing the villagers that life doesn't have to be this way – nobody is specifically tasked with the job of educating the villagers of El Bak. "Until we can provide a safe and secure environment, we will have a hard time moving forward," says Bell. "We're the soldiers, we're not the educators, we're here to provide a safe environment for schools to be built, for a new country to be built."

It seems there's no education without security, but there's no security without education. Winning this war will not be easy.

It's just after dark on Monday night and the bright moon lights up the mountains. Murnaghan and Gallant hang out in a trench near the base's front gate, telling old stories and laughing at the misfortunes of war. It's cool and calm and for a few moments it doesn't seem like such a violent place. But it is. The enemy is out there, watching. Everyone knows it now for sure because today those ghosts in the hills emphatically reconfirmed their presence. "We are here and we will fight you," the rockets seemed to say.

CHAPTER TEN

SOME NOTES ON WRITING 'OPERATION MEDUSA' AND THE ETHICS OF WAR REPORTING

The three articles on Operation Medusa in this section – particularly the first one – did cause a bit of controversy upon publication.

In the media and on the Internet, the debate seemed to boil down to a question of what Fraser knew and why he chose to move the attack forward by 48 hours.

While I took my best shot at explaining what I had discovered in the original articles, I have learned a little more in the time since.

Shortly after the publication of the first article, I received a letter written from a CF email address by an officer with an interesting perspective and who had a problem with one part of the article:

"The article is excellent and I'm glad the truth is finally coming out; however, in your statement that 'So, with little if any battle procedure, no reconnaissance and intel that was either insufficient or wildly wrong, Sprague led his force down the bank and into the river.'

"You're wrong. The intelligence was clear! The General was clearly informed! And clearly chose to ignore the intelligence! Intelligence can only advise the commander; that was done, he made the decisions.

"Please keep my name out of this ..."

While the writer did request anonymity, it can be said that the officer was in a position to understand the intelligence effort in Kandahar. What seemed to bother some people about the articles, meanwhile, was that they showed a side of warfare that was better left out of the public debate. Dirty laundry, it was called.

From another perspective however, it could be argued that while soldiers may (largely) follow the dictum of 'ours is not to question why, ours is but to do and die' it should be taken for granted that the media will question why.

And this brings up the question of ethics in war reporting. If questioning or reporting is sometimes 'unhelpful' to the larger campaign, what should journalists do? And how should the CF conduct itself?

The following discussion of the ethics of war reporting was originally given as a speech at the Royal Military College in Kingston, Ontario during a convention on leadership ethics given by the Canadian Forces Leadership Institute. While it is sometimes painfully sincere, it does hint at some of the greater issues underlying the question of who gets to manage and select the information coming out of Afghanistan.

This article will discuss media and ethics in a complex security environment. Specifically, I will tell you some stories from my September/October 2006 trip to Afghanistan and explain how these experiences have given rise to some concerns about where and how the Canadian Forces are attempting to control information coming out of that theatre.

So, specifically then, I want to do three things. First, I want to establish the importance of the role played by the media in the Afghan situation and lay out the general ethical problem as I see it. Second, I want to give you an example of increasing restrictions on freedom of the press in Kandahar and, finally, draw some hazy conclusions and give a few opinions, too.

Now, I'll give you an early disclaimer just so I don't lose anybody: I am not going to be talking about anything to do with Operational Security or Personnel Security. Also, for the record, even though I may tell you things other journalists said, I'm speaking only for myself here.

So, the first task here is easy: establishing the importance of the media to task force Afghanistan. It's easy because Colonel Fred Lewis, who was the deputy commander over there, told me directly how important the media is. Pinned on Colonel Lewis' wall at Kandahar airfield is a very interesting document. It is more or less the Canadian campaign plan, a diagram of what needs to happen to establish a functioning Afghan state. And the key element in the campaign plan is, interestingly enough, the Canadian public. Here's what Colonel Lewis said:

"The will of the Canadian people is our centre of gravity. So, define centre of gravity as our strength. If our strength falls, we lose."

I found this amazing, so I asked him, 'Now, how does a military force bolster or maintain the will of the Canadian people?"

"Yeah," he replied. "You know, that's the 64 million dollar question. It is a hard thing to do. I think a lot of it is our embedded media program. The media over here are here to tell the truth. That is really all we ask, is tell the truth."

So here's the situation then. You've got the Canadian Forces deployed halfway around the world fighting a pretty classic counter-insurgency campaign and it's been clearly understood at a high level that the war is lost if public support is lost.

And what's more interesting is that Colonel Lewis, among others, believes that the enemy is very well aware of this fact. For example, Lewis told me that in his opinion, the semi-conventional battle fought in September down in Panjwayi was, in reality, an enemy Information Operation. The point of that battle wasn't to defeat NATO forces militarily; it was to undermine confidence back in our respective homelands.

If Lewis is right, and I for one think he could be, then what's happening over in Afghanistan is pretty much the definition of Fourth Generation Warfare, defined by Marine Colonel Thomas Hammes in *The Sling and the Stone* as a form of warfare that "... uses all available networks – political, economic, social and military – to convince the enemy's political decision-makers that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly for the perceived benefit. ... Unlike previous generations it does not attempt to win by defeating the enemy's military forces. Instead, via the networks, it directly attacks the minds of enemy decision-makers to destroy the enemy's political will."

For the CF, those decision-makers are the Canadian public. And, interestingly, the Canadian media is almost certainly the major conduit between the enemy and the Canadian public.

So when a suicide bomber rams a Canadian convoy, the enemy leaders who sent him there didn't do it with the hope that it would lead to a military defeat of the NATO coalition, but instead with the hope that it will undermine support for the mission back home.

There is an old axiom I read somewhere that explains this situation pretty well: Terrorism is an information operation disguised as military action.

Now, this is a pretty tricky ethical dilemma for both journalists and military leaders. If the enemy is using the media as a conduit, then the media are, in essence, accomplishing the enemy's war aims for them. It may seem – if this is the case – like the simple answer is to deny the enemy's plan by

restricting or manipulating the information – flow back to the Canadian public.

However, it's not so simple, because, ultimately, our entire system is based on the rule by the people, and if the people aren't getting the information, or are getting manipulated information – if freedom of the press is denied – then we are short-circuiting the system, effectively cutting the decision-makers out of the loop, and that could have disastrous consequences.

Consider this definition of terrorism from the American historian Tony Judt. "Apocalyptic terrorists measure their achievement by our response to them. Terrorist's 'strategy', after all, has always been to kill, maim and terrify democratic countries into abandoning their values, 'revealing' their repressive face and polarizing their separate constituencies. With no rational aspirations of their own, they succeed by sowing division and prompting us to neglect our values, our aspirations."

Now, let me give you an example to make all of this a little more real. On Friday, September 29, Private Josh Klukie, Bravo Company, RCR, stepped on a landmine in Panjwayi. I was out in the field when it happened, but I came back in time to catch the tail-end of an angry struggle between CF leadership and some of the embedded media.

It turned out that Globe and Mail journalist Graeme Smith had written a story with a level of detail that had created some blow-back from somewhere, maybe DND HQ (Department of National Defence Headquarters), maybe somewhere else, I don't know. (There are lots of rumours about that.) Here's the part of the story that caused the trouble:

"The blast threw Klukie about 50 metres off the road," Corporal Blois said. "He landed in the vineyard. I think he must have hit one of the walls. He was lying on his back when the American medic and I found him."

He continued: "We immediately started working, without saying anything

to each other. He put a tourniquet on his right leg, which was almost completely gone. I put tourniquets on his arm and his other leg.

"He was breathing," Corporal Blois said. "He had a pulse. His eyes were moving. He looked right at me. It was just weird. He couldn't talk."

This quiet, desperate scene lasted maybe three minutes, Corporal Blois said. "I had that last tourniquet on him, I grabbed him by the shoulder, I'm like, 'This is nothing Josh, this is nothing.' He just looked at me, smiled, and that was it. He died right there."

So, the upshot was that, as a result of this story and a similar but less detailed one by a CP (Canadian Press) reporter, it had been decided somewhere, by somebody, that the embedding agreement should be changed and that once it was embedded, reporters could no longer report on the manner in which Canadian soldiers died or report any specific details about their deaths. The media were informed of this intention by Colonel Lewis, who told us all at an unfortunate moment, just after giving an on-camera briefing about the death of Trooper Mark Andrew Wilson.

Anyway, it quickly turned into an argument. You have to picture it: maybe a dozen media all crowded around Colonel Lewis, taking turns hammering at his position while maybe three or four public affairs officers stood around behind, in the dark, listening. Lewis' main point was that the story was deeply unfair and insensitive to Klukie's family. And it was a good point.

I wasn't sure where I stood on the issue, mainly because I'd been out in Panjwayi the day before, having heard about the problem already from another journalist, got into a little debate with a warrant officer and a sergeant and I found it sort of hard to defend the level of detail in the Globe story. But still, I wanted to defend it in principle. So I was a little stuck.

And then, as I was standing listening to the debate between Colonel Lewis

and the journalists, the voice of a public affairs officer rang out behind me: "This is a voluntary program, you can leave if you don't like it." While of course true – the embedding program is voluntary – this was not a good thing to say in the middle of a debate. Squelching dissent with ultimatums from a position of power is not going to win any allies.

So here were are in this late-night debate with Colonel Lewis and the reporter from the Canadian Press was fighting hard and kept repeating variations on one theme: "Every time something happens that you don't like, you threaten us with a new rule. You can't keep doing this."

The CP reporter went on, arguing that Canadian soldiers are not swooning to their deaths over here, they aren't simply vanishing. The subtext was, of course, sure you don't like this information reaching the media, maybe for several reasons, but how can you decide what the Canadian public has a right to know or not? Perhaps it is important that they know everything that's happening over here.

Clearly, of course, some information needs to be restricted. But creating new guidelines, in the field, which don't really fall under those broad umbrellas, seems to be something else. Something closer to censorship.

(As a rather important side-note, I'm not sure if the embedding agreement has at this point been changed or not. But either way, the issue is one of principle.)

The CF seems to have basically three recognized options for controlling information. To quote Navy Captain Chris Henderson from the Summer 2006 edition of the Canadian Military Journal, "Operational security is maintained through a judicious combination of mutually agreed guidelines (the breaching of which will result in removal from the program), the professional integrity of the journalists and security-at-source – whereby the soldiers are enjoined to be discreet in what they say to reporters, and to 'stick to their lane.'"

I'll now try to explain why I think using the embedding guidelines to use the media as an information chokepoint is both impractical and possibly unethical.

The practical reason is the easiest to talk about, so that's where I'll start. After the discussion with Colonel Lewis, the journalists retired to their tents and, to be honest, everybody was kind of indignant. A couple of us shared stories of the things we'd seen but that we didn't, or wouldn't, report. Here's mine:

On Thursday, October 5, 2006, I went down to Panjwayi in a three G-wagon convoy. The intelligence reports given to the soldiers just before going out (which I overheard because I was in the area, even though I officially wasn't supposed to hear it) said there were as many as a dozen suicide bombers waiting for a Canadian target.

So the first twenty minutes or so were pretty quiet but, still, it was tense. By this point we're driving down Highway 1, just in a real busy area on the outskirts of the city. We're basically bombing up the middle of the road, you know, 60-70 kph, real tight formation, with the middle jeep I'm in staying super-tight against the lead wagon. All of a sudden I can see the turret gunner on the lead wagon crouch over his C7. It all happens in just a few seconds. Everybody in our jeep sees it. Now I'm not sure whether our driver drifted left to see what the gunner was looking at or if the lead wagon drifted right to get out of the way, but all of a sudden we kind of pop out from behind the lead wagon and there's a battered old Toyota Corolla arcing in straight for us. It's going like 60 at least and we're literally a heartbeat away when the gunner finally opens fire. I see the Corolla's windshield spider and it swerves into the ditch. We blast past. It all happened in seconds.

And so, nobody knows what would have happened if the gunner didn't shoot, or if it was a bomber or what, but I'm glad he did, because nothing about that situation looked right to me. So, this whole event was very

stressful for everybody, not least of whom the young reservists involved. After this happened, we were sitting around in the Afghan school compound they were using as a base and they started working off some of the stress.

It started with a few jokes but then went to teasing the gunner, who had been real quiet since the incident. Nobody really got a fix on who was in the car, or really any details, so the spirit was not serious, but this is some of what they said.

"So what, is that your idea of a warning shot, shooting the guy's daughter in the forehead?"

"Yeah, what kind of a warning is that, like 'watch out or next time I'll shoot your son in the forehead too?'"

One of them turned to me and said, "You know, he thinks ISAF stands for 'I Slaughter Afghan Families.'"

And, without a doubt, these soldiers weren't being serious. They weren't being malevolent at all; they were trying to make their buddy feel better. They were just trying to handle the situation. I think the gunner did exactly the right thing. He had no time and no options. If the Afghan driver was a bomber, then that shot through the windshield was a heroic last-second save. But can you imagine if they said this in front of a reporter who didn't share this perspective?

Because on the other hand, I'm not sure how many editors and/or readers would blame a journalist for reporting the conversation as it happened. Maybe it is important. Maybe it shows something about the mission. I don't think it does, but that's my ethical judgment, which may not be shared by all.

Now, of the various stories I heard from different members of the media,

mine was probably the least controversial. So, the point is, there's so much going on that trying to control information by accruing embedding restrictions is just not going to work, especially if the media becomes passionately adversarial – something which is bound to happen if they feel manipulated or abused.

I believe the better option is security-at-source. The only mistake I think those young reservists made was not caring that a journalist was sitting right there listening, or respecting what kind of damage they could do with their stressed-out humour.

But it's not an easy situation for anybody.

Perhaps we can look to history for some guidance. Certainly censorship has been a part of war reporting for a long time. During the Falklands War for example, the embedded British media had to actually submit their stories to a military censor, who routinely chopped out anything that could be at all controversial. And so, I must note, that this censorship doesn't seem to have compromised their values too badly.

Surely in WWII there was lots of censorship as well, to which the press almost unanimously agreed. But still, there were lots of great stories written from that conflict. For example, the American correspondent Ernie Pyle, who was himself shot dead near the end of the war, wrote *The Death of Captain Waskow*, which in my opinion is one of the greatest pieces of war correspondence ever written. I'll quote a long section of that here, because it's important:

"The Death of Captain Waskow" by Ernie Pyle.

AT THE FRONT LINES IN ITALY, January 10, 1944 – In this war I have known a lot of officers who were loved and respected by the soldiers under them. But never have I crossed the trail of any man as beloved as Capt. Henry T. Waskow of Belton, Texas.

I was at the foot of the mule trail the night they brought Capt. Waskow's body down. The moon was nearly full at the time, and you could see far up the trail, and even part way across the valley below. Soldiers made shadows in the moonlight as they walked.

Dead men had been coming down the mountain all evening, lashed onto the backs of mules. They came lying belly-down across the wooden packsaddles, their heads hanging down on the left side of the mule, their stiffened legs sticking out awkwardly from the other side, bobbing up and down as the mule walked.

The Italian mule-skinners were afraid to walk beside dead men, so Americans had to lead the mules down that night. Even the Americans were reluctant to unlash and lift off the bodies at the bottom, so an officer had to do it himself, and ask others to help.

The first one came early in the morning. They slid him down from the mule and stood him on his feet for a moment, while they got a new grip. In the half light he might have been merely a sick man standing there, leaning on the others. Then they laid him on the ground in the shadow of the low stone wall alongside the road. I don't know who that first one was. You feel small in the presence of dead men, and ashamed at being alive, and you don't ask silly questions.

The unburdened mules moved off to their olive orchard. The men in the road seemed reluctant to leave. They stood around, and gradually one by one I could sense them moving close to Capt. Waskow's body. Not so much to look, I think, as to say something in finality to him, and to themselves. I stood close by and I could hear.

One soldier came and looked down, and he said out loud, "God damn it." That's all he said, and then he walked away. Another one came. He said, "God damn it to hell anyway." He looked down for a few last moments, and then he turned and left.

Now, just for example, if the no-death-details rule had been in effect, Ernie Pyle would likely have been kicked off of Kandahar Airfield for writing this. Which means, because he was a wise man who had signed the embedding agreement, he would never have written this. That would be a shame.

While obviously the CF needs to control information for several reasons, I don't believe that control should extend into the domain of the free press without explicit and painstakingly reasoned justification.

As I understand it (from speaking to a retired Judge Advocate General [JAG] officer) the test to be applied is one of national security, which is the exact question: Where is Canadian national security best served? By succeeding at all costs in Afghanistan, or maintaining adherence to abstract values like freedom of the press?

I don't know where the perfect balance lies, but freedom of the press is guaranteed within the Charter of Rights and Freedoms which guarantees the rights and freedoms set out in it subject only to such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society. If the press is to lose a particular freedom, in this case reporting on deaths, it seems wise to make a strong legal and moral case for why this should be done. I don't believe that this was done to a high enough standard in this case.

But, on the other hand, allowing the insurgents a free and easy shot at undermining the will of the Canadian public must probably also be resisted. The answer there, I believe, is security-at-source. Making journalists work hard to dig up a story is fine, threatening to cut off their access if they report the truth is not.

Now, I may not have done much justice to this issue, as there is clearly a sprawling debate hidden here somewhere, particularly about how to balance the needs of national security with our Canadian values of freedom and openness. But I believe that we are doing ourselves no favours if we short-circuit the democratic system, which of course relies on a free press. I think that Canadian society expects to hear the whole truth. And while the situation is complex, if there is an error, I believe it is safer to err on the side of freedom, not restriction.

Major Mark Campbell (right) briefs the Operational Mentor Liaison teams (OMLT) teams before Operation Ateesh Bazi kicks off. April 2008.

PART THREE
KANDAHAR, 2008: DOCTORATE LEVEL COUNTER-INSURGENCY

By 2008, the mission in Afghanistan seemed to take on a kind of inevitability, a momentum, a life of its own. If the illusion of easy success or definitive victory had ever existed, it was now surely gone.

By 2008, things had gotten a little grimmer for the CF in Kandahar province. Every time a convoy went outside the wire, everybody was ready for the boom. Nobody was confused about what could happen and nobody really talked about it.

For better or worse, right or wrong, I left Kandahar after that trip with the impression that a large proportion of the soldiers were now merely 'punching the clock.' The eagerness to engage with the population I'd seen in the past was, well, in the past. There was aggression, no doubt, but now it bordered on hostility.

Beyond the soldier's normal thirst for battle there was something else. Whether it was indifference to Afghan army weapons skills and maintenance or indifference to the finer points of orders issued from headquarters (HQ), the soldiers I met out in the field were no longer gung-ho at any costs.

While many factors were possibly to blame, the foremost for me was the corrosive effect of improvised explosive devices (IEDs); or the entire syndrome of the IED. It's not merely that these soldiers could be killed at any moment, but that civilian complicity with the IED-placers was now an established fact among the infantry, which had many subtle ramifications.

In 2004 and 2006, only the newest and most naïve soldiers placed much trust in the testimony of Afghans, whether army, police or civilians. But by 2008, there seemed to be no trust at all. The IED epidemic made it unavoidably clear once and for all that a high (but silent and duplicitous) percentage of Panjwayi's villagers were not on our side.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE AFGHAN WAY OF WAR: ON OPERATIONS WITH THE OPERATIONAL MENTOR LIAISON TEAM

For my money, the toughest assignment a Canadian soldier can get in Afghanistan is to be assigned to an Operational Mentor Liaison Team (OMLT) in some far-flung FOB or outpost. These guys live a rough life and they are out fighting the war Afghan-style – which often means taking more risks than the CF would ever normally consider acceptable.[3]

[3] This story first appeared in Legion Magazine.

In the early afternoon of Operation Ateesh Bazi's second day, as our patrol staggered through its tenth hour and third suspected insurgent stronghold, the heat became something more vivid and invasive than a phenomenon of weather should ever be.

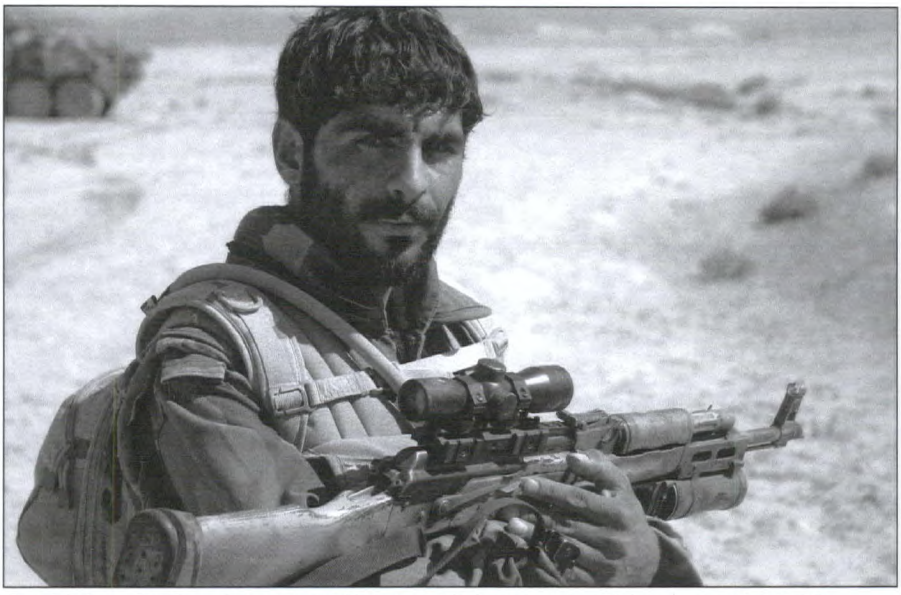
Numbers alone cannot contain or relate the effect of that high-noon Afghan desert sun on the brains and bodies of cold-weather-bred Canadians. You are dimly aware that your body's systems are being overwhelmed as your body armour cooks you like simmering hot plates strapped to your chest and back and head and you get so hot it would be inappropriate to call it hot. You suck at the air. You feel like you should claw at something.

Captain Matt Aggus talks tactics with Lieutenant "Shumps" Matiullah. April 2008.

But still we walked. Somebody said it was 42 Celcius. Somebody said it was 44 in the shade. The landscape of villages and mud walls and poppies and sand lost all contrast and saturation until everything looked overexposed and indistinct.

At first we spoke of many things to ease our discomfort. Then we saw mirages. Then our vision got blurry and so, instead, we dreamed of mirages.

The operation moved on. Fighting-age males were reportedly moving around ominously ahead. The Canadian soldiers literally panted. The sweat reached down to the bottom of their heavy pants. They sweated so much



An Afghan National Army soldier and his inaccurate "high speed" AK-47.

they stopped sweating. At that point, they began to cook. All unnecessary talking stopped. The patrol moved 50 metres and took a 30-minute break. It moved another 50 metres and took a 40-minute break. These are not long distances. Everyone collapsed in whatever shade they could find.

It was no easy job to get here, to the village of Khenjakak, deep in the Panjwayi district of Kandahar province. And now that the Canadians and all the Afghan soldiers they could muster had finally made it here, all anyone was thinking about was trying to make their water somehow last to the end of the day so they didn't collapse.

Contact with the enemy at any point in the afternoon would have been a dire and truly unwelcome event. It would have been slow motion chaos – a 20-second run would have combusted the fittest man.

Luckily for us it didn't happen, though everyone had expected it would. Instead of Taliban, the Canadians found mostly deserted villages, as if everyone had gone on vacation, probably somewhere cooler to escape the heat. The Taliban, if there were Taliban here, apparently saw the huge mass

of Afghan soldiers and the undisclosed amount of Canadian armour that had converged on them from across the province and saw the Kiowa gunships circling overhead and decided that now would be a good time not to pick a fight.

Despite the heat, the Taliban probably made a good choice – nobody was in a very good mood for fighting.

One unit of Afghans on the operation was led by a man the Canadians called Al-Qaeda.

Lieutenant Walid got that nickname because of his wispy beard, his devotion to prayer and his penchant for saying 'Inshallah' – translation: it will happen if God wills it – to every statement or request, but he just laughs anytime anyone calls him Al-Qaeda.

Walid is in charge of 1 Company, 205 Kandak of the Afghan National Army (ANA), a unit stationed at FOB Sperwan Ghar, a Canadian-run base in Panjwayi district, Kandahar Province.

Walid's other nickname is Shumps. In fact, no one calls him Walid; they only call him Shumps, though no one ever told me why.

Shumps is in many ways a typical Afghan soldier: he's proud and brave, mostly jovial but slightly inscrutable – no matter how closely you observe him you're just never quite sure what he's thinking or how he's feeling. He often smiles a lot when he's upset and looks most angry when he's joking.

Shumps and his company of Afghan soldiers have four Canadians attached to them as advisers. The Canadians belong to an OMLT (or omelettes as they're always called); OMLTs are small groups of Canadian soldiers assigned to operate within an Afghan unit, often a company of infantry soldiers but also police units and others.

Over the course of two days in late April 2008, Shumps and his Canadian mentors joined another Afghan company and a giant force of Canadians in Operation Ateesh Bazi, a complex two-day manoeuvre into an area of Panjwayi labelled as an 'insurgent stronghold', a series of villages that hadn't seen a significant NATO presence in over nine months. While the villages targeted by Ateesh Bazi – Adamzai, Khenjakak and Salavat – were only a few kilometres south of a major Canadian supply route; the area just hadn't been an area of concern for NATO, until now.

At the heart of these villages is a place called Nakhonay which, in the early spring of 2008, was very much the talk of the Canadian soldiers spread around Panjwayi. Nakhonay was a place people spoke about in hushed tones at night. Hundreds of Taliban were there, the rumour mill insisted, operating openly in the streets; they'd set up a parallel government and had their own money and ran their own courts. It was all so far-fetched, everyone agreed, that it pretty much had to be true. In any case, Shumps

The ANA and Canadians navigate through the dust.

wasn't worried. Or maybe he was. It was hard to tell. Sometimes he seemed impatient, but maybe he was just bored. The language barrier prevented me from finding out. Although even there, on the topic of the English language, Shumps was hard to read.

Shumps' degree of fluency in English even stumped Captain Matt Aggus, Shumps' OMLT mentor for the last couple of months and his constant shadow in this operation.

Aggus is a cerebral, almost pensive officer from the PPCLI and his best guess about Shumps' language skills was that the Afghan officer understood way more English than he let on, but only really reacted to it if it was important or something he really wanted to hear. Later on during the operation, for example, when one of Shumps' soldiers became openly critical of Aggus' map-reading skills, Shumps was for once entirely able to understand the situation without the need for a translator.

Aggus, who looks fit enough to do three consecutive marathons, was not in the least bit phased by this. Shumps' strangely inconstant bilingualism was just another small fact of life for Aggus, something to think about as he looked off at the horizon.

A graduate of Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, Aggus originally wanted to be a doctor but, as he says jokingly, he gave up on the idea of fixing people and decided to break them instead. He doesn't mean that of course, black humour being what it is, but it is something he says.

Aggus' role as an OMLT officer is far from easy. He does not command Shumps. Nor is he in charge of training him. Instead, he is simply there to advise, maybe lead by example, and perhaps most importantly to act as a liaison to other NATO forces and air support during operations like Ateesh Bazi.

The general scheme of manoeuvre for Operation Ateesh Bazi was for OMLT Major Mark Campbell and Aggus to take the largely Afghan force from Sperwan Ghar down through an insurgent village and link up with the Canadian force of tanks and armour coming out of FOB Masum Ghar. After meeting up, the two groups would conduct a live-fire range in the late afternoon before camping in a desert position for the night and heading for the outskirts of Nakhonay at first light.

On the morning of April 24, 2008, day one of Operation Ateesh Bazi, as Shumps' Afghan company was rolling out of Sperwhan Ghar, heading for the biggest operation they'd ever conducted, Aggus loaded up into an RG-31 Nyala with the rest of his OMLT team – a medic and a driver/gunner and his second-in-command, Warrant Officer John McNabb – and headed off to the find the war.

McNabb, a former Airborne Regiment soldier who's on his third tour to Afghanistan, seems to have evolved that special talent of learning to endure, with great humour, whatever calamity or head-shaking misfortune befalls him.

In addition though, especially on an operation like this, you just get the sense hanging around McNabb that he knows what he's doing and, consequently, I never let him get out of my sight for the next two days.

Of course, going out to find the war, as Shumps, Aggus and McNabb intended to do, is not always so easy, especially in Afghanistan where the one thing you can always count on is that things won't go as planned and, further to that, the particular way in which things go sideways always seems surprising, if not malicious.

The operation's first stop was to clear the village of Regay, which had been assessed to have some kind of connection to the potential bad guys in the Nakhonay area. As the convoy pulled out, McNabb slammed shut the Nyala's only door and looked only slightly mystified to see the large and long steel door latch swinging freely in his hand. The latch had snapped off and McNabb now found himself holding several kilograms of very important but now useless metal.

The ANA prepare to move out into the villages.

McNabb shook his head and then looked around a little bit, as if maybe to make sure no one was playing a joke on him. "No f–king way," said the medic sitting across from McNabb, looking in amazement at the now floppy door. "That is unreal."

In short order, McNabb had found a way to extend his leg and jam his foot against a small lock, holding the door shut but quite likely putting himself in extreme discomfort given that he was locked into his seat by a tightly-cinched five-point harness. He didn't say a word. He just shook his head and looked like he might be waiting for whatever would go wrong next.

He didn't have to wait long. First the radios wouldn't work, then a couple of ANA vehicles got stuck in a wadi, then we began hearing early reports that the large Canadian force we were supposed to meet near Regay was already massively delayed with navigational issues several kilometres to our east and was currently sending tracked vehicles churning through mud walls in search of a way out. The radio was calling out for the deployment of the Canadian specialists in charge of compensating Afghan farmers after their property is damaged by NATO.

Meanwhile, the Nyala's door kept flying open as we careened over the deeply rutted dirt roads.

McNabb just shook his head grimly.

"I learned a new saying from a soldier the other day," I said to McNabb. He looked at me and lifted his chin a millimetre or less, a clear sign he wanted to hear it.

It was a harsh saying, the kind of thing soldiers say to describe the never-ending brokenness of life at war.

"F–kery knows no bounds," I told him.

He smiled fractionally, clearly highly amused. Then he paused to think. "The Afghans have a saying like that too," he said quietly. "It's called 'Inshallah'."

Keep in mind, this was only about 30 minutes into the operation, well within sight of the Sperwan Ghar base we had just left. Friction. That's what they call it, the guys who specialize in making plans. It means that in a complex event like Operation Ateesh Bazi, a lot of little things are going to constantly go wrong, and so you have to build a robust plan that can handle contingencies and not get totally messed up. On this operation, the planners must have been good because things did not derail, despite the heavy friction.

After some hours of delay and logistical shuffling, the large two-company Afghan force made its way to the outskirts of Regay, where they dismounted from their vehicles and prepared to head into the village on foot. Before the patrols shoved off, the soldiers all sat around talking about what the coming days might bring, whether or not the Taliban would fight or lay low. The general consensus was that they'd lay low, but no one was really too sure. "It's our first time poking at the southwest side of Nakhonay," said Major Campbell. "We want to define it first, or try to define it."

"If we go in with overwhelming combat power they're not going to stand and fight. They're not stupid," he said, ending the sentence almost like it was a question.

And with that, the operation officially kicked off as the Afghan soldiers with their Canadian mentors started walking in three long columns towards Regay, the sun already high in the sky, beating down on the craggy mountains in the near distance.

As for Regay, perhaps you've previously read a description of a place in some foreign country that was described as being 'right on the edge of the

desert.' Well, Regay is even more on the edge of the desert than that. In this case, it's the Regestan desert, sometimes called the Red desert, for its deep ochre colour and really the village of Regay is late in the process of becoming a part of this desert.

The outskirts of the Regay are a series of sand dunes with ruined walls sticking out of them. There are no adults around, but some children run free in the dunes, possibly playing.

Inside the town, smaller sand dunes crowd the little alleys between the compounds and many of the ruined buildings look like they were ornately and intricately carved by some strange force from another planet and then bombed by some other force. In general, the place feels like it belongs in a time slightly after the end of the world; or before it, perhaps. Either way.

Aggus and Shumps together kind of herd the Afghan soldiers in the right direction. While Shumps seems attentive, he never takes any persistent interest in the map Aggus has, or the tactical plans he speaks about or the navigational advice he gives, and instead seems content to roll with the punches, whatever punches may come.

The patrol moves right into the middle of the town and sets up on a sand dune out in the open. The other Afghan company can be seen in the distance, circling the outskirts of Regay and heading towards us.

"7-1 Alpha," Aggus says into his radio. "First company has cleared objective Little Mountain and gone firm at grid 31256. Over."

Aggus drops to the ground, keen to conserve energy in the blistering heat. "This is wicked," he says sarcastically, "It's still three hours until the hottest part of the day – it's going to be a f–king scorcher."

Shumps is unconvinced that he wants to hold up his patrol here, however. And with his company spread all out in small groups hundreds of metres

in every direction, his brief hesitation is enough to cause confusion, as many of them kept walking, apparently unaware we had reached our objective.

The interpreter tells Aggus that Shumps wants to move the company up into the tree line some 500 metres ahead, where some of the other Afghan soldiers are already waiting, and apparently asking for his company to move up.

"I know they're waiting," replies Aggus, instantly, "but we can't go. We can't go until we get in touch with the Kandak commander and he tells us what he wants us to do."

The interpreter relays this to Shumps, who seems to consider it for a moment before indifferently gazing off towards the tree line ahead. From his perspective, the constant Canadian need to chart and check positions and clear all movements with the chain of command probably seemed pretty tedious. The tree line up ahead was no doubt a better position than sitting out in the open, as we were now, so it must have seemed odd to him that we would hold this position simply because it was the position chosen on the map days earlier.

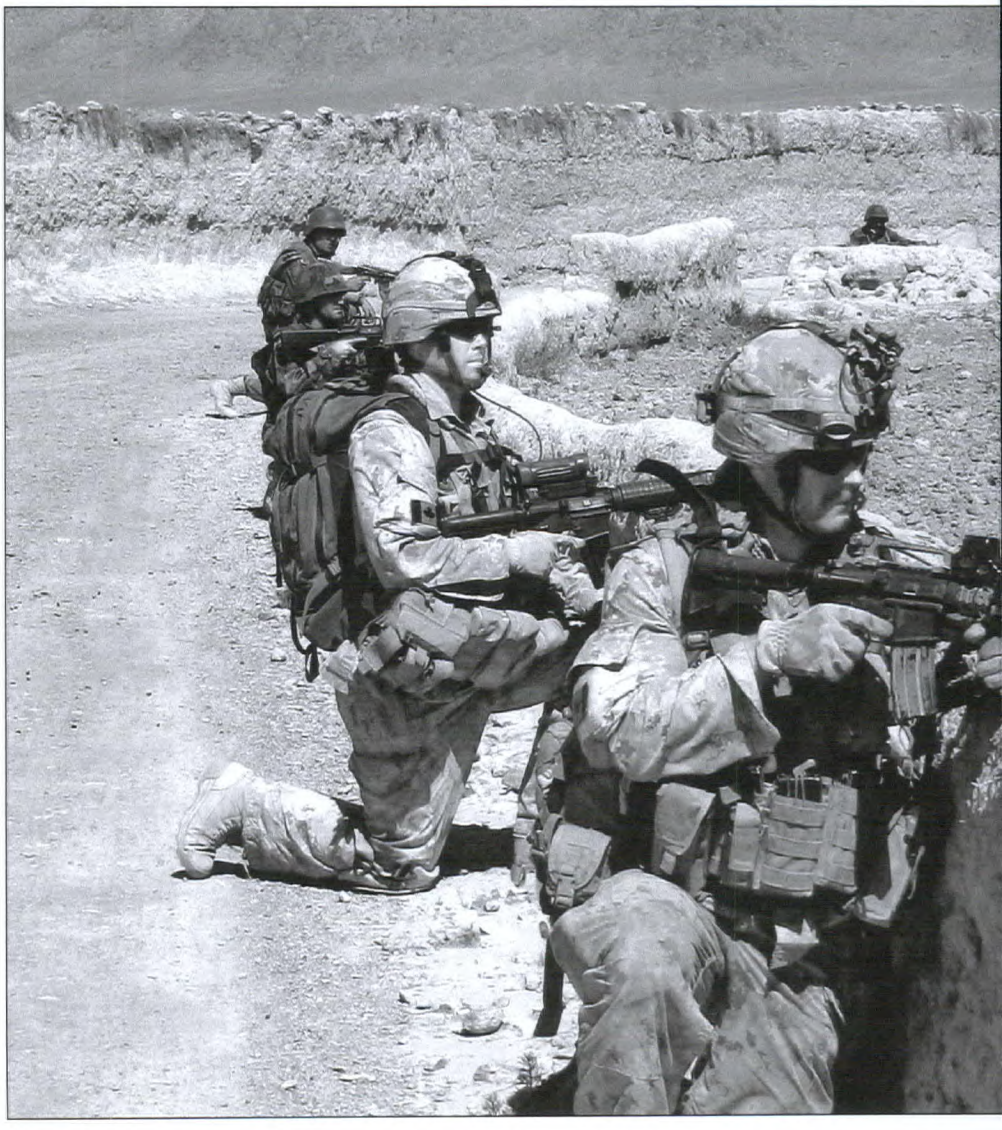
The interpreter, a young Afghan from the north, probably did not speak English much better than Shumps did. Despite this, he was taking a very great risk to be here, as interpreters, unlike ANA soldiers, are widely reviled by many Afghans. Moments before, the interpreter was bragging that not even his own mother knows what he does for a living.

Shumps and the interpreter talk for a few seconds, then the interpreter tells Aggus that the Kandak commander's radio is broken and Shumps can't reach him.

Aggus sighs and calls it in himself, already knowing the answer that will

come back. "The call sign here is intending to move forward to the copse of woods at the edge of objective Big Mountain," he says into the radio to Major Campbell, "and I just want to confirm that that is OK with the Kandak commander, because the call sign here does not have comms with him. Over."

The garbled reply comes back quickly.



Aggus looks up and relays the message to Shumps via the interpreter. "So we're going to stay here until the other company is into the village and then we can move up to the tree line."

In an effort to draw some lesson from the little exchange, Aggus adds: "If 2nd company tells you to come and join them in the village, you should tell them that's not the plan, and that they don't have the right to tell you that, and that you're going to take your orders from your commanding officer."

Warrant McNabb successfully stares down the village of Adamzai.

Shumps momentarily looks at the ground, and then the sky, in much the same way a small boy would as his dad corrects his bad behaviour: he's listening, maybe, but not too happy about it.

In any event, Shumps eventually did get his way and the whole patrol moved up into the trees and promptly sat down for a long break.

Relaxing in the sand, Aggus and McNabb listened on the radio as the tankers from Lord Strathcona's Horse grumbled back and forth about getting their Leopard tanks unstuck and pointed in the right direction. There was occasional laughter.

Meanwhile, about the only friction in Regay came in a most leisurely way, as the patrol had parked itself in the shade, awaiting pickup.

"Do I have time to brew up?" McNabb asked Aggus.

"Probably," replied Aggus.

But sure enough, as soon as McNabb had put his meatloaf and gravy ration in the heater bag, the vehicles appeared on the horizon, charging in our direction to pick us up.

"This is bulls–t," McNabb snarled mockingly, "You said we had time."

"Well, it's war, you take your chances," Aggus replied, chuckling gently as he watched McNabb stuff his still smoking ration bag into his backpack. It doesn't take long for real bad luck to catch up to McNabb though, as halfway through the road move to meet up with the Strathcona tankers, our Nyala has some sort of epileptic fit in the now-scorching desert sand.

No matter what the driver did, the Nyala would no longer make forward progress. The entire crew unloads and from the outside it appears that somehow the brakes have seized. Every time the driver hits the

gas the Nyala hops up and down vertically in the sand, belching black smoke, looking for all the world like some dying petrol-age animal.

Aggus and McNabb spend much of the afternoon kind of looking forlornly at their Nyala, calling every once in a while for assistance, which eventually comes in the form of a Strathcona recovery vehicle which disgorges an already harried and sand-blasted tank mechanic who, after hearing the symptoms of the Nyala's failure, readily admits that while he cannot fix our problem, neither can he pull us out.

McNabb just shakes his head.

As an afterthought, the tank mechanic asks Aggus to start up the Nyala so he can see the problem.

Predictably, the Nyala starts up and drives off almost as if it was never damaged.

McNabb just shakes his head.

It must have been the heat, is the general conclusion as we pile back into the Nyala, eager to catch up with everybody for the day's concluding live-fire gun range exercise. As Major Campbell says, "it's always good to know if your gun is going to work."

During target practice Shumps' company's heavy weapons, 12.7 mm and 14.5 mm machine-guns mounted in the back of Ford Ranger pick-up trucks, misfire and jam so fatally that, of the four brought up to the firing line, only one ever gets off any rounds and those somehow manage to miss the entire mountain and instead go sailing off towards Pakistan.

The Canadian tanks, meanwhile, blast the mountain most impressively, shearing off huge chunks of rock in a noisy display of power that couldn't

really be lost on anyone for many kilometres around.

With the shooting done, the entire convoy, now several kilometres long and larger than ever, mounted up and roared off around the mountain, heading for a campsite near Nakhonay.

The big question, of course, is why Nakhonay and its environs were allowed to go so long without a significant coalition presence.

Only about 10 kilometres as the crow flies from a major Canadian base, it's hard to see how allowing the development of an 'insurgent stronghold' could be in the best interest of stability in Kandahar province. "We haven't been there to clear the place, and hold the place and so that is something we're looking at," said Brigadier-General Guy Laroche back at Kandahar Airfield shortly after the conclusion of Ateesh Bazi.

While some Canadian officers like to claim that it's a sign of NATO success that the enemy is no longer standing and fighting, no longer engaging in any sort of conventional tactics, there are no easy answers to what would happen if a Canadian convoy drove directly into Nakhonay. While chances are quite high there would be a large conventional fight, it does remain to be seen.

"We went there to see if there was enemy there," said Laroche. "We don't know, if in fact, there are many bad guys in the region; and the thing is, there was no direct engagement."

In the end, the critical factor is manpower. Generating the forces for Ateesh Bazi was no easy feat and required almost a month of planning. In order to accomplish the basic aims of counter-insurgency strategy in Panjwayi district alone – to clear an area of insurgents, hold it, and then build on it – would clearly require more troops. While troops may be in short supply generally, at least for a few weeks in April at Kandahar Airfield (KAF) there was reason for optimism because the United States

Marines had arrived in force and they came fully armed and ready to fight any enemy.

The 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit is a fully self-contained fighting force of nearly 3,000 jarheads and they came packing as many high-calibre weapons as they could possibly bring with them – it's hard not to feel pity for the Taliban when gazing upon the seemingly endless rows of Marine armour and fighter jets and attack helicopters.

Indeed, there is no aura quite like that of large groups of young, battle-hardened U.S. Marines hanging around the airfield in groups, bored, waiting for the commanders to clear the red tape and unleash them into war. (Although by the time you read this, they have well and truly gotten into the fight, having deployed west to help the British in Helmand province.)

These Marines are the only people I've ever met for whom dying in action, I suspect, would actually be considered a good time. Or at least, it would be more fun than hanging around KAF for two months, which is what they had been doing so far.

It must be said, KAF is not a nice place to spend your life. All the basic requirements are there, but it is a joyless existence, close enough to home to remind you of how much you miss it, but not close enough to keep you happy.

Of course, the all-you-can-drink espresso bar does take the edge off. But even still, you have to have patience to stand and press the button repeatedly in order to get a full cup, not to mention an iron will to endure the hostile stares of the chronically under-caffeinated European soldiers behind you waiting for you to get out of their way.

But even at KAF, well, the hostilities intrude on the air-conditioned malaise. Even at KAF, it cannot be put delicately, you could explode at any second, as rockets fall from the sky with regularity.

When you are aware a rocket could land on you at any moment, life takes on a different feel. It's a subtle switch, a small click somewhere in the brain.

You go, very gently, from living normally to merely hoping you'll survive. In order to endure in this new mode, it seems like you have to give up a little bit, to give yourself up to fate or chance or Inshallah or whatever you feel like calling it. And not even the all-you-can-eat soft ice cream can help you much with that reality, especially after seven, eight or nine months, which is what many of the Canadian headquarters staff now serve.

However, the big threat of death is not a rocket to the head, Canadian soldiers are re-assured in their welcoming theatre brief. It is instead the kind of unstaunched arterial bleeding of the type that occurs, when, say, your legs are blown off.

As a result, most of the soldiers have very impressive skills with a kind of high-tech military tourniquet that you winch up to effectively clamp the limb off. While the tourniquet stops the bleeding in most cases, the chances of keeping the limb are not what you'd call stellar.

But sometimes not even the tourniquet works, which is when the nuclear-grade option – quick clot – is called for. This is a kind of chemical that you sprinkle over the area of the wound as if it were kitty litter and which sears everything shut so hard that moderate burns regularly occur to the person who applies the clotting agent, never mind the poor person being clotted. The agent is so powerful that it can't really be used on anything but limbs, as it's been known to eat through organs entirely.

And this is just the information in the welcoming brief.

Meanwhile, out near Nakhonay on day two of Operation Ateesh Bazi, the sun was creeping above the horizon at just past 0500 hours and everybody was slowly coming to life, no one having succumbed during the night to

Major Mark Campbell and Captain Matt Aggus discuss their route home.

any vipers or scorpions or spiders or Taliban.

The plan was to drive to a position roughly in the centre of all the villages and then set up the tanks and Canadian vehicles there to provide fire support while the Afghans and OMLT cleared the villages, essentially compound-by-compound.

After the entire convoy arrived at the central battle position, it became necessary to readjust everything and so, for a short time, anyone in the villages could have watched this fearsome array of firepower driving in circles, literally, across their fields. "There's no way they're going to fight us now," McNabb noted. "They're going to think we're all f–king crazy."

"If we don't have a plan, there's no way the enemy can second guess us," another soldier chimes in merrily.

"He who plans first, plans twice," says a third.

Eventually though, everything gets sorted out and all the OMLTs muster up for their final briefing.

"Alright, if there are no final questions, let's have a f–king good one," says Major Campbell to the assembled OMLT groups. "Take it slow and steady, it's not a f–king sprint it's a marathon: we're going about six, seven kilometres today if we end up doing all the f–king objectives. And for those who haven't been in contact yet remember, it's for f–king real, so you only get one chance – don't f–k it up. Alright, let's go."

On the outskirts of the first village, 212 holds up the patrol to tell Shumps that a report has just come over the radio that insurgents are planting IEDs in the village ahead of us. Helicopters roar overhead.

Shumps is unmoved. He asks a villager walking by with a donkey if there are any bad guys in the village. The villager reportedly says no. Shumps is still acting like he's going to the bakery. He keeps glancing around like he's looking for a bus to catch. It's kind of disconcerting.

Aggus uses this brief pause to try to convince Shumps that he needs to be far enough forward that he can influence the direction the lead elements of the patrol will take through the village.

While Shumps eventually does as Aggus advises, it doesn't turn out to be quite enough. The scheme of manoeuvre for patrol through the villages, while not complicated, was tricky enough to cause problems.

The two ANA companies were to parallel each other in a staggered formation, with one company leading, then holding firm while the other company overtakes it before itself going firm. In this way they would leapfrog the whole way through the three villages. But as the two ANA companies enter Adamzai, the first village, they began to overlap each other, essentially swarming into the village.
On the ground, watching the ANA soldiers moving in essentially every

direction at once, it's plain to see that if the enemy started shooting now, the best bet would be to hit the dirt and hold on because bullets would quite likely be flying in every direction.

It didn't take long for Major Campbell to catch up to Aggus and Shumps. "The geometry of fire is all f–ked up," said Campbell, indicating that one company would have to move ahead while the second company held here.

As the operation slowly sorted itself, the navigational issues that started the problem proved very difficult to resolve.

While the lead elements of the Shumps' company were only maybe 50 metres ahead of the map-toting command group, in the complex system of alleys and small roads running through the network of villages that was enough of a gap to cause ceaseless confusion.

At one point, Shumps grew tired of the continual holdups and decided to lead the patrol himself. Aggus quickly pulled him back.

As the operation went on, everybody began to feel the pain of the continuing navigational problems.

One young Afghan soldier who'd spent the day in the lead element walked up beside Aggus after yet another reversal of direction and made to grab the map from him, as if in mockery.

"You have to talk to that guy," McNabb thundered at Shumps.

"He is not educated," replied Shumps, his English suddenly quite solid.

"He is a crazy soldier. All soldiers are crazy."

McNabb just shook his head.

Patience, says McNabb, is a key thing that working with the ANA has helped him learn.

"They certainly taught me patience," he says. "It's something I should have learned 10 years ago."

And McNabb does make sure to patiently watch out for everybody, especially Aggus, who he makes sure is well-hydrated and eating his rations. But he also looks after Shumps, who late in the day becomes increasingly ill in the heat, though he steadfastly refuses medical attention.

While there's no doubt the heat was the toughest enemy facing the coalition force on Ateesh Bazi, there were also the rather basic military difficulties involved in bridging the two fighting cultures.

The Afghan soldiers seem disinterested in our particular way of war – our maps, our plans, our tactics. They have their own system, much more casual, seemingly based on instinct as much as reason. But, as everyone notes, the Afghan culture is steeped in warfare and the men themselves are tremendous fighters, so it's hard to say their way of war is wrong or inappropriate.

However, it is plain to see that the quiet fatalism epitomized by Shumps' constant 'Inshallahs' does have a downside.

For example, one of the soldiers in Shumps' company has an AK-47 rifle totally tricked out with cool-looking additions like a grenade launcher, butt-stock pad and even a nice-looking scope, an enhancement rarely seen as useful on the AK-47, a weapon notoriously inaccurate at the kind of range that makes a scope necessary. In any case, as one of the Canadians says, the scope isn't meant to be mounted on that rifle and the butt-stock pad is wonky so the whole jury-rigged system kind of looks high-speed but 'couldn't hit a barn on a sunny day.'

But for the Afghan carrying the weapon, whether or not he hits his target would probably be more a result of God's will than any basic technical issue like a well-zeroed sight.

But, despite this, it's not the Afghan tactical proficiency that most concerns Aggus. In fact, as Aggus says, the single biggest thing he's working on with Shumps and the company is not fighting, but sustainment and logistics. But even there, the Afghan soldiers' penchant for leaving basic things to chance does grind them down. For example, Shumps and his company knew their electricity generator was going down, but they didn't submit paperwork to their battalion headquarters to have it repaired or replaced, despite the urgings of their mentors. So it went down and they spent a week without power, complaining to the Canadians all the time.

McNabb describes this as the school of hard knocks. And even though it is a tough way to learn, as McNabb notes, it applies to everything they do, even gun maintenance, which was obviously something to worry about given the feeble showing by the ANA heavy weapons the day before.

"We tell them to clean the guns. We lead by example," said McNabb. "But I'll be f–ked if I'm going to go out there and clean their guns for them." Those could be some very hard knocks indeed.

In any case, at the end of a long day of patrolling and with no enemy seen, the convoy's about to move out again. McNabb gives orders to Shumps: "When we move, you fall in behind us."

"Inshallah," comes the reply from Shumps – if God is willing.

McNabb shakes his head, a resigned grin on his face. "I love that s–t," he says. "It's like when I tell my 16-year-old daughter to do something and she says 'whatever.'"

Regardless, eventually everyone got formed up. But as the convoy was heading north out of Nakhonay, a tight hard blast rippled down the line of Canadian armour. A Canadian vehicle just up ahead had been blown up. It was another LAV and strangely it was fourth in the order of march, behind two tanks with mine rollers and a tank with a blade dozing the road.

No one was saying how the IED managed to survive the passage of the minesweepers, but the general consensus was that it was probably detonated on command by a nearby Taliban.

There were injuries but nothing too serious, although the recovery operation took enough time that darkness fell and the entire convoy now needed to navigate a very tricky route home in the dark using night-vision equipment.

It didn't take long for friction to take over. Hours passed as the convoy lurched first one way and then the other in the dark, trying to stay off the roads and away from the IED threat but getting itself more and more jammed up in the process.

It went on and on in the dark. Four hours, five, six. We were unable to find a route and were getting bogged down. Enemy movement was spotted in the distance. I couldn't see him, but I knew McNabb would be out there in the dark, quietly shaking his head.

Certainly the OMLT mission isn't easy. They are essentially doing basic training in a live-fire warzone, and without the authority to actually conduct training. Despite this, Aggus strongly argues that the OMLT system is good and that it will work. And indeed, Atessh Bazi was a success. It was complicated and tough but the intent of the operation – to gather intelligence on possible enemies in Nakhonay – was completed.

At the very least, no one can ever doubt the bravery of men like Aggus

Battle comes to Haji Beach as French fighter jets drop bombs across the river.

and McNabb and Campbell, out there somewhat beyond the front lines, risking everything to help bring about a more capable Afghan army.

Back in our LAV we got moving again, only to hear a funny report. "I don't think the gun system is working," said the LAV commander over the intercom.

"Why?" came the reply from the LAV's rear air sentry.

"Because it says we're going southwest."

"We are going southwest," the soldier replied.

This was a problem, because the southwest was the direction we'd come from.

Then the inevitable command came over the radio: if we can't get out of here on the next try, we're going to have to form a defensive perimeter here for the night.

Everybody groaned, except for the headquarters guys who spend much of their time on KAF and were seemingly looking forward to the adventure of a night spent in bad-guy territory. Then somebody on the radio came up with an idea to give up on the night vision. This made sense, as everybody within 10 kilometres could have heard us and seen the non-night-vision-

Master Corporal Travis Good near Haji.

equipped ANA flashing their lights.

So the order was passed down: the convoy was switching to white light.

Seconds later, the vehicle intercom filled with gentle, bemused laughter. "It's a giant jugf–k," croaked the rear sentry.

In the darkness, everyone had gotten confused and when they turned their lights on, the sentry saw a strange sight: the whole convoy was strung out and jumbled, headlights pointing in all crazy directions, hardly two pointing the same way.

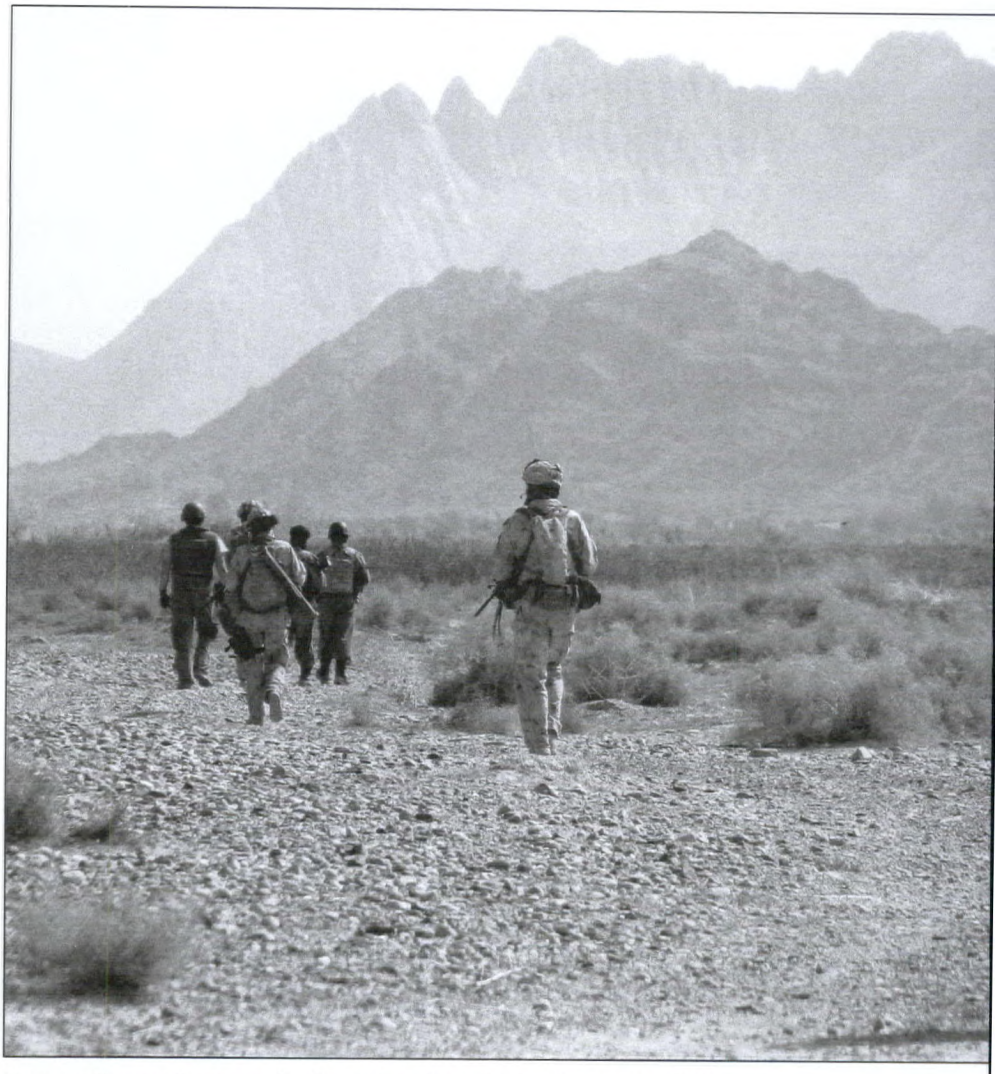
Everyone, it seemed, had a slightly different idea of how to go about getting us out of the mess we were in.

CHAPTER TWELVE

TOO FAR FROM CIVILITY: ONE WEEK AT A TINY, EMBATTLED CANADIAN OUTPOST

What follows are brief snapshots from a week in the life of one small Canadian outpost in Afghanistan – Haji Beach – in April 2008. It is a story of roads closed and being built, of enemy ambushes and the confusion and daily frustrations for soldiers at the sharp end of a war that's hard to see clearly, even when you're right in the middle of it.[3]

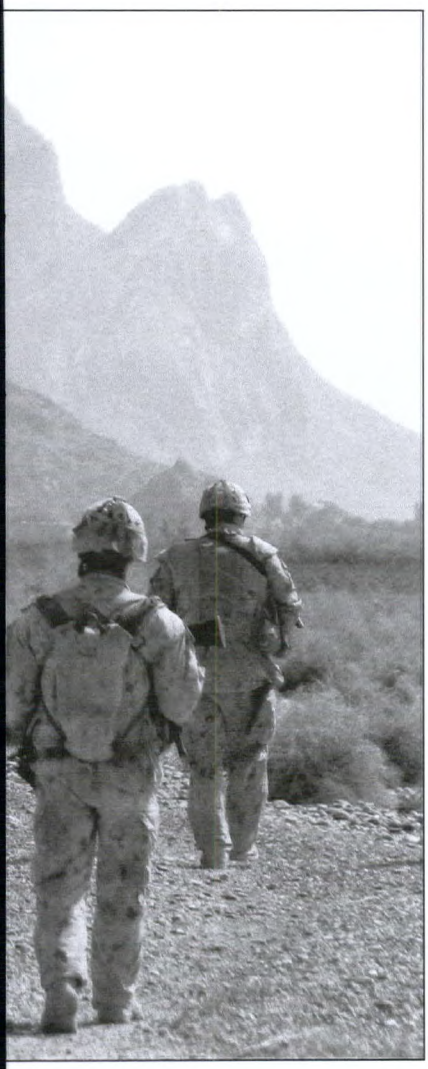
[3] First published in Legion Magazine.



It was often safer to go by foot than by vehicle, due to the IEDs.

The Enemy is Real

In a random grape field in Panjwayi, Afghanistan early last spring, two Canadian patrols linked up and hunkered down as the war revealed itself on every side. About a kilometre northwest, an enemy force attacked a coalition base at a place called Kolk.



To the east, a base at Pashmul was being hit. To the south, Masum Ghar was taking fire. Three ground attacks in 15 minutes.

The small Canadian force, alone in the field, did little more than exchange wary glances as fighting erupted. It seemed as if the enemy had a plan. Everyone waited to see what would happen next. It wasn't supposed to be like this. The enemy was supposed to have gone underground, wasn't supposed to be staging co-ordinated ground attacks across one of the most heavily patrolled districts in Kandahar province.

Gingerly, the Canadian force moved out to continue its long march. It had been hours grunting in the sun and there were many more hours to go before they would get back to their base and while the machine-gun fire died off, thoughts of the enemy remained.

Counter-Insurgency 101: Securing Roads and Populations

The cardboard sign hanging on the blast wall reads "PSS Lost Boys: Haji Beach" and it says quite a bit about what the war feels like for the Canadian soldiers spending weeks of their lives at this tiny battle-blasted compound on the western edge of Panjwayi District.

Police Sub-Station (PSS) Haji is a collection of tents, bunkers and fortifications all piled on top of each other in what was once an Afghan residence in the middle of what was once the town of Haji. It is situated just south of the Arghandab River and which will once again be a functioning town if the Canadians have their way.

In April 2008 though, Haji was pretty much a ghost town; and fixing the place up wasn't going to be easy. To begin with, the only main route in the area, dubbed Route Fosters by the Canadians, was closed to traffic because there were crazy amounts of bombs on it and, no matter what the Canadians tried, they just couldn't keep it cleared. Even when they patrolled the road literally 24 hours a day, it still wasn't enough. The bombs kept going off and Canadians kept dying.

While there's nothing terribly dramatic about securing a small little road like Route Fosters, without it open and full of traffic the whole area will remain volatile and slow to develop. It is for this reason that road construction and security is, in many ways, central to the Canadian strategy in Panjwayi.

The most common victims of IEDs were locals, often children.

As one tactic in that strategy, there are currently four police sub-stations strung along Route Fosters: Haji, Zangabad, Taloqan and Mushan. The sub-stations represent a fairly new development in the Canadian strategy to create security in southern Afghanistan, as Lieutenant-Colonel Dave Corbould, battle group commander, explains. "The police sub-stations were really established as ink dots. We talk about the ink spot, they were essentially representing ink dots on the map, because they were just a 10-man Afghan National Police section and a Police Operational Mentor Liaison Team (POMLT) of military police and a few combat arms soldiers; so their ability to influence the surrounding area was limited. And also they represented initially a police precinct that, in theory, local nationals could come to; but they were not really able to expand much beyond their wire because they just didn't have the manpower.

As we came in, the plan now was to expand those areas of influence for those police sub-stations and so down in Panjwayi we've flooded the area with ISAF platoons to increase their ability to influence. So instead of a pinprick on the map, they're now an expanding ink spot beyond three, four, five kilometres outside of the PSS, almost like a regional policing or patrolling capability that we would think of in Canada.

There's another reason the Canadians have started sending platoons out to these small forts and it's an issue of what one senior Canadian officer politely termed a problem with the Afghan forces 'survivability'. Simply put, the first attempts to establish regional police stations ended with a lot of Afghan policeman getting killed.

In theory, and often in practice too, these kinds of roles are filled by camera-shy, bearded Special Forces guys who have been specially selected and trained for the mission. With forces like these in short supply however, the soldiers currently manning these forts are regular Canadian Forces soldiers, who, while certainly not untrained for this mission of foot patrols, intelligence gathering and building trust with the locals, are by their own account more habituated to mechanized operations and conventional infantry tactics.

Hillbillies Intrude on Army Paradise

In general, the further you get from the main NATO base at Kandahar Airfield, the more ragged things become. At KAF you can have Pizza Hut and all the warm showers you want. At Haji Beach, you'll go to the toilet in a bag and even the rations are being rationed.

They call it Haji Beach because, at least in theory, there's a sandy bit of riverbed down by the Arghandab that does look temptingly hospitable. In actual fact though, it is not. When a small group of soldiers from B Company, 2nd Battalion of the PPCLI tried to go swimming down at the beach just after arriving in Haji, they were promptly shot at by the Taliban, whom in this case the soldiers describe as 'the hillbillies across the river.'

While nobody was hurt, the small attack did have the unhappy effect of forcing 6 Platoon Warrant Officer Jeremy Abrams to ban all further swimming activities on the beach. "Haji is something where you can take a photo off a postcard and then army it up a little bit and that's Haji," says Master Corporal Travis Good. "It depends on the angle you take your photos from, because it will give you a totally different perspective. You could stand in one spot and take pictures and there's a couple guys sun tanning, a couple guys lifting weights, and you see me in the background barbecuing and you're like, 'That's not a bad go.' But then you take five steps to the right and you take a picture and you can see big holes, a bunch of rubble, wire, a big pit of garbage on fire, a river that's 300 feet (90 metres) away that you can't swim in because there are landmines and shit everywhere. So yeah, it's like an army-jazzed-up postcard picture of paradise."

While it may sound like fun, the police sub-stations are very far from safe places. By their very conception, they are somewhat beyond friendly lines. At Haji Beach, surrounded as it was by ruined buildings and complex terrain, and having essentially no defences at the front gate – some loosely rolled wire and a swinging pole – you could not help but imagine the many ways even a small enemy force could do serious damage.

On patrol near Haji Beach.

When not out patrolling, the soldiers at Haji often sat around the very small kitchen area telling jokes and making fun of whomever there is to make fun of. Indeed, black humour is the order of the day at Haji Beach, and seemingly nothing is out of bounds in the name of a good laugh.

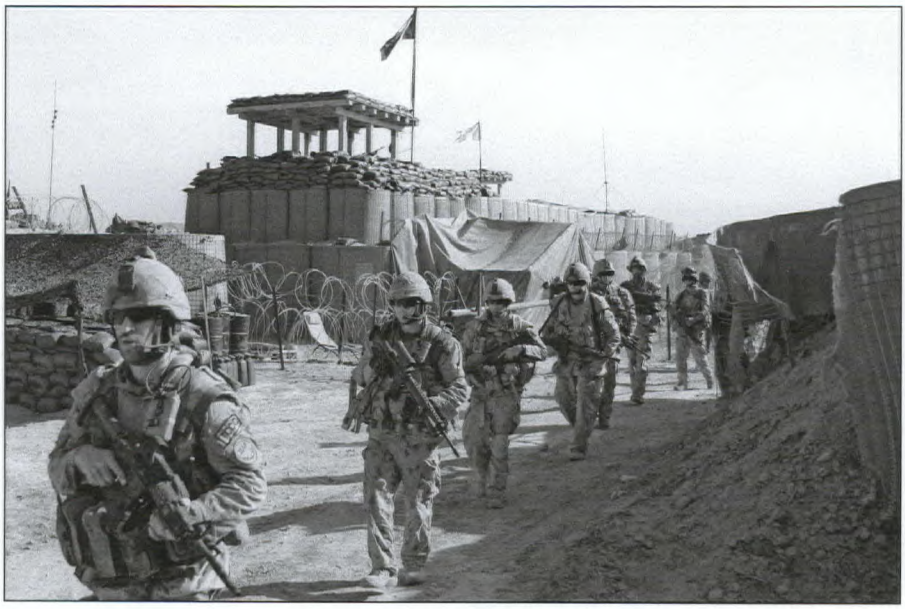
For example, the soldiers have been told not to make any jokes about life 'inside the wire' back at Kandahar Airfield versus life 'outside the wire' in places like Haji Beach. While everyone knows the soldiers back in Kandahar are working hard and taking risks, too, this doesn't stop the guys at Haji from saying this order came down because all the jokes were making the guys back at KAF cry, and "the salty tears were screwing up the flavour of their cappuccinos."

Another joke the soldiers love is to work up various response lines to enemy contact that mock their restrictive rules of engagement. One variation has a soldier standing up to enemy fire with a megaphone, shouting: "Greetings. We are from ISAF. While we respect your right to attempt to kill us, due to our engagement policies we will not be able to return fire for an estimated 45 minutes. Please stand by."

Meanwhile, There is Some Good News

Eastern Panjwayi is in some ways the showpiece of Canada's effort in Afghanistan. In 2006, the area around the town of Bazaar-e-Panjwayi was insurgent central, a run-and-gun paradise for RPG-toting marauders and nearly empty of normal everyday stuff like merchants and schoolchildren and farmers. Things have changed now, sort of.

With the main Canadian FOB in Panjwayi situated right beside Baazar-e-Panjwayi, in the shade-less dust bowl known as Masum Ghar; and with the constant attention of the helpful, if overstretched, teams from the Canadian-run PRT – the town has become something different than it was.



A patrol leaves Police Sub-station Haji, April 2008.

There are new projects springing up all over the place, schools are running and well-attended, people walk around freely and come and go from the surrounding villages and the markets are full of activity.

Of course, the bad guys still lurk around and they're still fiendishly deadly. In late spring 2008, Corporal Michael Starker was shot and killed in a gun-fight within sight of the sentries at Masum Ghar. Beyond this, though, is the greater problem, that many of the insurgents who used to call the area home have now picked up and moved down the road – either south to the area around Nakhonay, or to western Panjwayi, or still further west to neighbouring Maiwand district or even all the way to Helmand Province – to fight the British and, more recently, the United States Marines.

This War is About Afghans

On the morning of April 17, the Haji Beach crew geared up just after dawn and went out on a foot patrol of the local villages. The basic idea was to stop and talk to whomever they could find in an attempt to gather information on the local situation.

Tagging along with the patrol was Sergeant Ole Frederiksen, a tactical CIMIC operator from the Provincial Reconstruction Team. CIMIC, which stands for civil-military co-operation, are the guys on the front lines of the hearts-and-minds effort and are charged with kick-starting the local economy through small projects. "We go out and initiate projects; basically try to help the locals," said Frederiksen. "Here (in Haji Beach), more than anything, you're just trying to get the people on board. What I was taught in (Canada), and what I'm doing in reality, is different. This is not a permissive environment at all. If I could just hire some locals to help out on some projects around the PSS, sort of bring them into the fold, pay them, let them see that we're not bad guys, then hopefully they'll get on board.

"And quite honestly we will gain information from them. If you look at eastern Panjwayi, that's what's happening. I mean, it's not any safer,

there's still Taliban there, but there's a lot of locals there who can see the benefits of what we bring. In eastern Panjwayi, there's a high school that's operational. We're working on building a clinic there. There are all these things. People are able to live there. Here, it's just not happening right yet.

"The people really don't trust us. And why would they? The last time they saw Canadian soldiers come through here they were shooting and blowing things up; that's a reality. It took a long time for eastern Panjwayi to get to the point it is now, and it's going to take a long time for this area. They have to see us on a daily basis, talk to us. Right now they have no real reason to trust us. And there are a lot of rumours, right? The other day when we were out we heard the rumour that ISAF was bombing innocent farmers. The insurgency loves that sort of stuff. It's not true, but they will take an actual event and twist it. That's part of the job, to make sure they know we're here to help and that we're not an occupying force. They have to be told that we're not going to shoot them."

During the patrol, Frederiksen did his best to talk to everybody he encountered. He talked to farmers and children and women and he heard the same story again and again. The Taliban are here at night, they don't like us helping you, they burn the schools, they plant bombs and then they run back north of the river. "They are thieves," said one man.

At PSS Haji, the Canadians are paired up with Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP), a group of theoretically well-trained Afghan police from outside of Kandahar province. While co-operation is developing, mistrust and even outright hostility still exists. Several of the Canadian soldiers expressed the belief that many Afghan forces, both police and army, made local agreements with enemy fighters which consisted basically of: 'If you don't attack us, we won't attack you.'

However, not all the problems are merely rumours. In one potentially dangerous incident at Haji Beach, a Bravo Company soldier made a fart joke that proved so offensive to the ANCOP that the aggrieved Afghan reached for his weapon and, for a few brief moments, it actually looked like armed violence was going to break out.

Inside the kitchen tent at Haji.

Frustrations Rise as the Enemy Appears, But Can't Be Engaged

Patrolling through Panjwayi is like jogging though an insane obstacle course in the most intense heat imaginable, with attack by enemy fighters and sudden death by IED a constant possibility. No one knows where the next threat will come from. A Bravo Company legend, Sergeant Jason Boyes, was killed by a bomb planted in a wall not far from Route Fosters just a few weeks earlier. The situation is tense. Some soldiers carry a single bullet in their pocket. It's kind of a superstition.

"As an insurgency they don't have rules of engagement," said Good. "They don't have a government back in their country dictating how things go. They don't have a public image to keep. They don't have to ask permission to shoot at certain things, or do certain things. They just get the job done." However, in the few weeks that Good has been at Haji, he has seen positive change. "The more presence we have, the more people are returning. So that would make me assume that they like to have us there. I think that the opinion of the people toward us is definitely improving."

While adults can certainly be wary, the kids often seem easier to reach. Sometimes they react with fear, but a candy or a few smiles win them over. It's hard to estimate the importance of small gestures in this kind of conflict. These hard kids of Panjwayi have spent two years being "candified" and smiled at by Canadian soldiers and, among some at least, there is recognition.

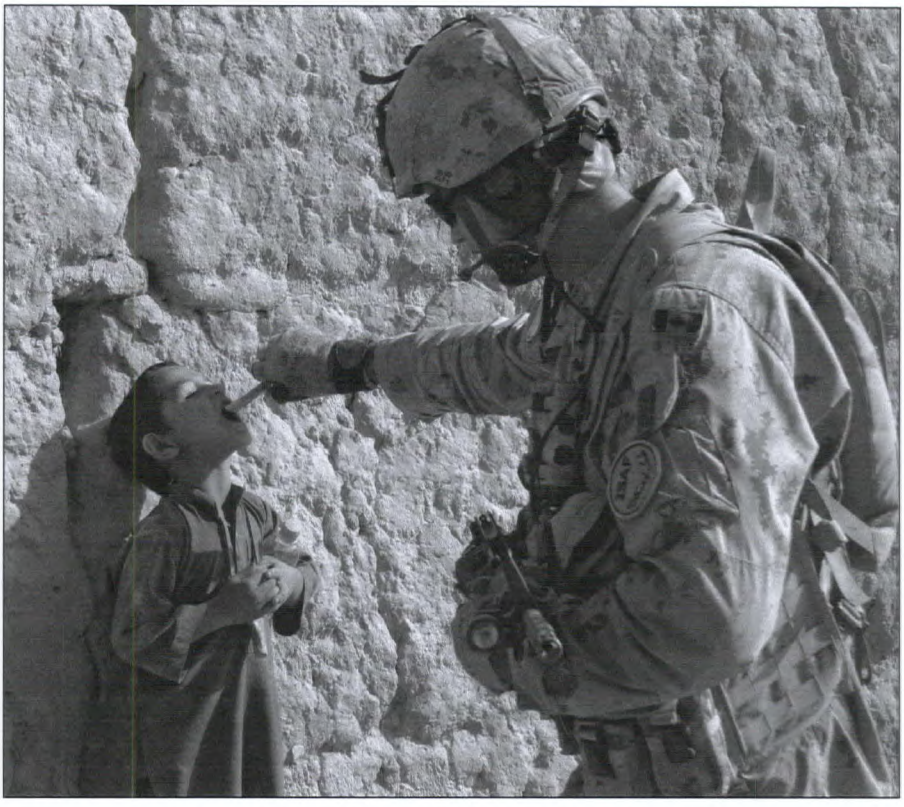
It's not all kids and candy out on patrol, however. One of the central tasks for these soldiers is to try to generate intelligence on enemy forces and their movements. To do this, the patrols stop and with the help of an interpreter they do gentle interrogations of pretty much every villager and farmer they come across. No one villager gives up much in the way of information, hardly anyone ever admits to seeing 'Taliban.'

In one instance, the patrol stopped just outside a small village a couple of kilometres from the Haji base and, as they were talking to a group of men working on a canal, two other well-groomed young men appeared up the path on motorcycles. The interpreter was immediately wary. "We have to talk to them," he told Frederiksen and Captain Bob Barker. "Those men are Taliban."

Frederiksen, a keen soldier always on the lookout for information, asked the interpreter how they should proceed to get information out of the suspects. "You guys must be very cruel to these guys," replied the interpreter. "Like the _____ (a NATO ally operational in Afghanistan). When I was with them, we beat them, we tortured them, we tortured everybody."

There was a moment of silence, as Barker and Frederiksen tried to understand what they had just heard. "We'll hold off on that," interjected Frederiksen, crisply.

There was another pause, then Barker replied, clearly with some humour in his voice: "It would make life ever so much simpler, however... actual-



Master Corporal Travis Good gives an Afghan boy some candy.

ly that's not true, it would make life briefly simpler and then someone (Barker looks at the Legion Magazine video camera, currently rolling) would break the story and everything would go to shit."

Moments later the Canadians moved in, and while they questioned the suspects using far more aggressive language than what they had used in the past few days, little information was gained and the potential bad guys were told to go on their way.

It is, no doubt, a frustrating situation for the soldiers. They knew these men were acting oddly, looking out of place, but they couldn't do anything about it. And so while torture isn't something you expect to see a Canadian Forces officer joking about, in this place, at war, perhaps even inexcusable jokes are unsurprising.

In another telling moment of high tension, a patrol out of Haji seemed to wander into an ambush in the making, as lines of Afghans could be seen in the tree lines ahead, waiting. At the key moment, when the patrol leaders understood what was happening, there was a disagreement about what to do. Frederiksen wanted to go forward and investigate, engage if necessary, but Barker wanted to go back. Both had their reasons.

For Frederiksen, and many of the other soldiers on the patrol, going forward to find out what was happening, possibly even to engage enemy forces, was exactly the reason they were out here. As Frederiksen said, "We can't turn and run away every time somebody challenges us."

Barker, however, would not be persuaded, even if the conversation did get tense. He wanted to go back. "The reason I was looking to go back was, first of all, the fact that we'd never been there before, so we didn't have a good feel for the ground. Second was the fact that it wasn't a real large patrol and it was a patrol to go out and get information; it wasn't a patrol to go out and get in a fight.

"My biggest concern was there were two groups moving, which to me indicated there was a fairly decent degree of control between them, I don't think it was just two random groups. So if we're going to go into a situation where we're getting into a fight I didn't want to go in half-cocked. So that was my biggest concern there. I fully understand where (Frederiksen) was coming from in wanting to go forward, but I didn't want to get the patrol pulled into a fight against a co-ordinated enemy that we hadn't planned for at all, in terrain that we didn't know at all; especially because the support that the PSS could provide in terms of fire was pretty much nil because of the range and in terms of a (backup force) they could field, it was very limited."

In the end the patrol returned to base without a shot fired.

Cracks in the Armour

The antiseptic image the CF seems to want to present, of stoic professionals doing their duty in a tough place, is both true and not. These are emphatically real people, with all the issues real people have. When they're sitting around the base at Haji Beach, they talk about what they're going to do when they get home, or legendary nights out when they were last home, or how screwed up the army is, especially the long-winded work-up training they had to endure. "I could write a whole book full of 'I told you so's,'" said one soldier.

They talk about other things too. They talk about watching Canadian Parliament on television and laugh how the politicians behave, about how they boo each other. "Grow the f–k up, you're running the country," laughed one soldier.

Primarily though, the most interesting and often hilarious conversations are provoked by exchanges overheard on the camp's radio, which is loud enough for everyone to hear. For example, one night the following exchange took place:

"If we pulled out of (PSS) Zangabad could the ANCOP hold it themselves?" asked headquarters over the radio.

"No," said Zangabad.

"What's your best guess about what would happen to them?" asked headquarters.

"They would die," Zangabad replied.

Much to the chagrin of the guys at Haji, every once in a while the radio would squawk a missive in their direction too. One night, the order came down that someone up higher wanted an operations plan that detailed the patrols and general war activities the men at Haji Beach would be conducting, and they wanted the operations plan to extend four days into the future.

The Haji Beach crew met in the dinner lounge to discuss the new orders. "If they want four days out they can get f–ked," said one soldier. This was the general consensus.

The soldiers joke about setting up an answering machine to handle incoming orders.

"You have reached Haji Beach. We're sorry, we cannot come to the phone. If you would like to leave a message, please press 10."

"F–k it, I'm getting drunk," said another soldier.

On a hot and lethargic afternoon, Captain Leifso comes over the radio to give a small morale-boosting and mission-clarifying talk to Barker, and Haji being tiny, the whole camp sat around and listened. "The intent is to patrol as much as possible, to push the Taliban out of the area so we can move onto bigger and better things. That is the intent, over," crackled Leifso's voice over the radio.

"Where are the bad guys staying? Are they moving during the night or during the day? Where do they store their weapons?

"As for security, go out and find info on the bad guys, and then we're going to plan an operation and then we're going to find them and kill them. That's as simple as that.

"I understand there are concerns about water and rations. We'll push them out.

"Regarding manpower issues, understood, ANCOP will not go out at night, we will.

"Niner-niner (Brigade Headquarters) wants to know if there is a six-hour patrol scheduled, why is it only taking two hours? And if 15 personnel are

A 500 pound bomb explodes on an enemy position across the Arghandab River from Haji.

out, what are the other 15 doing?"

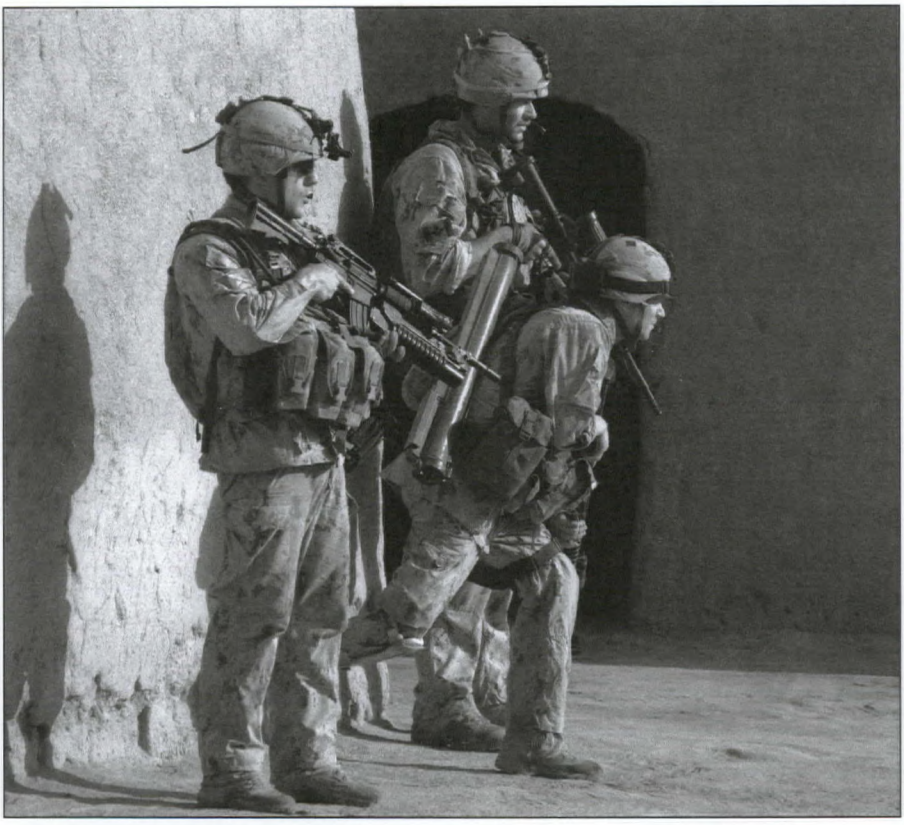
And with that, Leifso concluded: "The only way we're going to make progress is to dominate the landscape."

There was a collective heavy sigh at Haji when the conversation ended. And while everyone knew Leifso was making good points, it was one more irritant – what one soldier called a "radio jacking" – to add to the list.

Shortly after that, a new order comes down to increase the tempo to three patrols a day. The guys start talking about creeping down the Arghandab hidden behind twigs. Continuing the joke, Warrant Officer Abrams comes up with the idea to disguise himself as an IED and hide on the side of Route Fosters. "It's our new operation, just pick up a plastic bottle and hide in it."

"If someone picks you up, just go limp and see where they take you," says the medic.

"If they caught us they'd just let us go," said one of the Bravo sergeants.



At this point in the war, Canadian were still entering compounds to search for insurgents.

"These guys are too old. I think they wanna die."

Indeed, the orders that come down don't always seem connected to the reality observed by soldiers on the ground.

Over the course of several days the requests got larger and larger. Eight-hour patrols, 12-hour patrols, 24-hour patrols.

Everybody sitting around the table at Haji just laughed. It's impossible, they agree, a person couldn't carry enough water to do it. "If they'd come out of the crystal palace once in a while they'd know that," said a soldier.

"I'd do a 24-hour patrol. I'd hump to Sperwhan Ghar and punch the OC [Officer Commanding] in the face," said a particularly disgruntled soldier.

"We get no resupply," said a soldier, "we're not enough of a priority to request alliance support, and yet they want us to hump our asses off, which none of us minds doing if there's a reason for it. But taking my guys out the front gate just to take them out the front gate is stupid."

"I think a 24-hour patrol would be more than a water problem, I think it would be a morale problem," said another soldier.

"All you can do when it sucks is laugh," said a third.

"I wish it would suck more," was the deadpan reply from another.

A Glimmer of Hope

The effort to build Route Fosters is the latest major project, with about 350 Afghans working to construct and pave the road by hand with wheelbarrows and hand tools. Despite the painful slowness of the project, it has at the very least injected some of the Canadian soldiers here with what is, unmistakably, hope.

Among the troops, particularly the engineers, stories circulate about the Afghan resilience and desire to work despite threats from the Taliban, and, sometimes, gunshot wounds.

Sergeant Terry Vandenbroek of 1 Combat Engineer Regiment tells a story of an Afghan worker who was stopped on his way to the road project by the Taliban, who demanded to know where he was going. He told them he was going to work on the road. The Taliban told him he could not go. The worker said he would go anyway. One of the Taliban loaded a round into the chamber of his AK-47 and told the unarmed worker 'You cannot go.' The worker replied, 'I will go.' So the Taliban shot him.

Later, the Afghan worker limped into the Canadian lines bleeding and, as Vandenbroek tells it, after being cared for by the Canadians, the Afghan worker was out of the hospital faster than expected, just in time to collect his next pay cheque.

You can see this story in a few different ways. First, that it's a true representation of the situation on the ground and that local Afghans, perhaps lured by pay cheques, are risking a lot to help in the reconstruction of their country. Or it could be just an anecdote, not truly representative of what's happening on the ground. But then it is at least representative of something, which is hope among the Canadian soldiers that – at least in some areas – the situation is getting better.

War Arrives at Haji Beach

Things weren't going perfectly out at Haji Beach. The soldiers were growing leery and command was becoming disgruntled because, to them, it seemed like their orders weren't being executed as they should have been. In addition, there was another large operation coming up and so command decided to pull several units from the field, including the Haji Beach crew, for a little morale-boosting rest. In order to do this, a giant column of Canadian armour and Afghan infantry would make its way from the base at Sperwan Ghar up the Arghandab riverbed to rendezvous at Haji Beach.

Everyone got up early on the day of the convoy, looking forward to a nice ride back to the luxury of Sperwan Ghar. The first sign that things were going wrong was when a giant blast rippled across the base. The convoy had just hit an IED within site of Haji, several hundred metres up the riverbed. Everyone crowded up into the guard tower to watch as a huge plume of smoke rose into the sky. The radios crackled. One of the engineer

Helicopters over Patrol Base Sperwhan Ghar. April 2008.

vehicles had been hit, its trailer blown apart. The driver was shaken, but uninjured.

The convoy ground to a halt in the middle of the river. Minutes later, as recovery operations began, the ground around a stationary Leopard 2 tank erupted in dust as another sharp explosion rippled across Haji Beach. At first it seemed like the Leopard had fired, but in fact it was an enemy RPG exploding on or near the tank. "Contact, contact, contact," Captain Leifso yelled over the radios. AK-47 fire erupted from the village on the north bank of the river. The Canadians fired back. Heavy machine-guns started bursting and the guys at Haji scrambled for their guns and vests.

In short order, Leifso tasked the Afghans and their Canadian mentors to attack the village on foot. It was too dangerous to send the Leopards or the LAVs. The threat of IEDs was too high. As the ground forces moved in, American attack helicopters started pounding the village with rockets.

In run after run the helicopters swooped in firing dozens of rockets down into the trees and huts. The enemy firing continued. The ground forces themselves, now near the village, came under fire. They made their way into the outskirts of the first village, but could get no further. They pulled back; it was going to take some heavy fire power to root the bad guys out. And so began the long and sometimes acrimonious search to find an allied warplane able to drop some bombs on the enemy force. Two fighter bombers checked in, but neither could drop its ordnance in this situation, prohibited as they were by national caveats. Finally a French fighter checked in. He didn't speak English very well but he could drop if someone were in imminent danger.

The forward troops understood what needed to happen next. A voice came over the radio. "We are in imminent danger," said the Canadian voice. The French fighter dropped three 500 pound bombs on the village from an altitude so high that, while it was possible to hear the jet, it was not possible to see him.

The insurgents would not die though. Just when it seemed the battle was over, as the American helicopters peeled off to refuel, three or four greasy clouds appeared in the sky above the Canadian convoy and then 'boom boom boom.' Air bursts – rockets fired intentionally high to explode at maximum range, raining shrapnel down on the Canadians. "Hatches down! Hatches down!" Leifso screamed over the radio. More guns erupted. The fight went on for hours. The helicopters returned and fired more rockets – many more. In the end, it was suspected that the enemy numbered between 4 and 8 fighters, and they kept the Canadian force of several dozen vehicles and about 200 allied soldiers engaged and largely pinned in place for almost eight hours. No Canadians were hurt by enemy fire, and while it can't be known for sure, the American helicopter pilots did report several enemy dead. No civilian casualties were reported.

The trailer of a Canadian route clearance vehicle moments after being blown up by an IED, under enemy fire.

Big Army, Small War

In many ways, it seems that in Afghanistan the Canadian army is stuck between two strategies. On the one hand, there is a noticeable shift to classic counter-insurgency strategy via PSSs and small strong-points, which is the classic 'ink spot' tactic where the hope is that small zones of security and stability across the region will slowly spread. On the other hand, there is the unmistakable fact that the Canadian battle group still needs to be able to pull off large, conventional operations whenever and wherever the insurgents appear in larger numbers.

"We struggle with the counter-insurgency approach," said Corbould. "We talk about it a lot. But we're not necessarily equipped to conduct counter-insurgency, and institutionally across NATO we're not setting ourselves up to conduct a counter-insurgency warfare doctrine. We do it locally where it's suitable and, at the tactical level, all kinds of brilliant minds are trying to apply the principles of counter-insurgency operations. But the reality is that it's balanced with a number of different agendas that are out there and trying to use a pure counter-insurgency approach is extremely difficult. If you want to know whether the strategy is working, well, there's no easy answer.

There are signs of progress and there are signs that the situation is worsening, in some places these tactics seemed to be working; in others the effort seems futile. The generals and staff officers remain optimistic but, politics being what they are, optimism from a general is not unexpected.

As for the guys in the field, they're still gung-ho in that peculiar Canadian way. They might think headquarters has their lost their marbles; they might think the bureaucracy of coalition warfare is too restrictive; they might even believe that the whole thing is being done all wrong; but they're still ready to do it. Perhaps that's all that can be asked of them.

In any case, after exhausting weeks patrolling at Haji Beach and a full day of fighting to get back to home base at Sperwan Ghar, the soldiers took turns being disciplined by the sometimes grumpy Bravo company sergeant major for having their pants on incorrectly or being insufficiently shaven. The soldiers didn't mind much though, they just shrugged and laughed and took the heat. This is just life in Afghanistan for the warriors of Haji Beach.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE C-IED TASK FORCE: ON THE (ABSTRACT) FRONT-LINES OF AN ASYMMETRIC BATTLE

Sometimes reporting on the CF can be very frustrating. With the following story – first published in Legion Magazine as *Left of the Boom* – it was clear that here was a strongly positive narrative for the CF, the kind of story that could capture attention and show Canadians that their military was adapting to counter a new threat and a new kind of war. But despite amazing co-operation from the unit's commander, Colonel Omer Lavoie, it was never possible to fully 'get' the story of the Counter IED (C-IED) task force. It was too sensitive. And while I learned enough to tell the basic shell of the story, I knew from several 'off-the-record' conversations how much more to the story there really was.

The feeling has been described by survivors as falling. Also as soaring. There's a flash and a shrieking darkness and then the weightless moments of maximum kinetic terror when the detonation blasts you beyond gravity. After the boom there is just distorted wreckage, dust and pain and shouting – for the survivors at least.

All the armour in the world and it just doesn't really matter. The vehicles get tougher but the blasts get bigger. There is simply no good way to keep Canadian soldiers safe once they get caught in the boom of the roadside bombs, the suicide bombs, the double-stacked shells of ancient Russian ordnance, the white Toyota Corollas packed with cheap dynamite – simply no way to protect them once they get hit by any of the things now known as Improvised Explosive Devices.

Part of what makes IEDs so hard to counter is that they can take on so many forms. They can be small, simple charges packed into plastic jugs and buried at the side of the road. They can be grenades embedded in walls, old artillery shells buried beneath asphalt, or they can be several hundreds of pounds of explosives wheelbarrowed into underground culverts. They can be carried in cars, trucks, taxis, bikes, by donkey and, of course, by people.

While nobody's releasing statistics on exactly what percentage of Canadian convoys were getting hit by IEDs through late 2008 and early 2009, it was a lot. Based on a literally seat-of-the-pants survey done in the spring of 2008, roughly one in seven trips outside the wire of Kandahar airfield resulted in some kind of IED incident.

At this point now in early 2009, more than 45 Canadian soldiers have been blasted to their deaths by the IEDs left by the insurgent bombers. It is a titanically inglorious way to die and a painfully hard tactic for any military to defend against.

Armour itself is not sufficient. Since 2004, the Canadian Forces has been

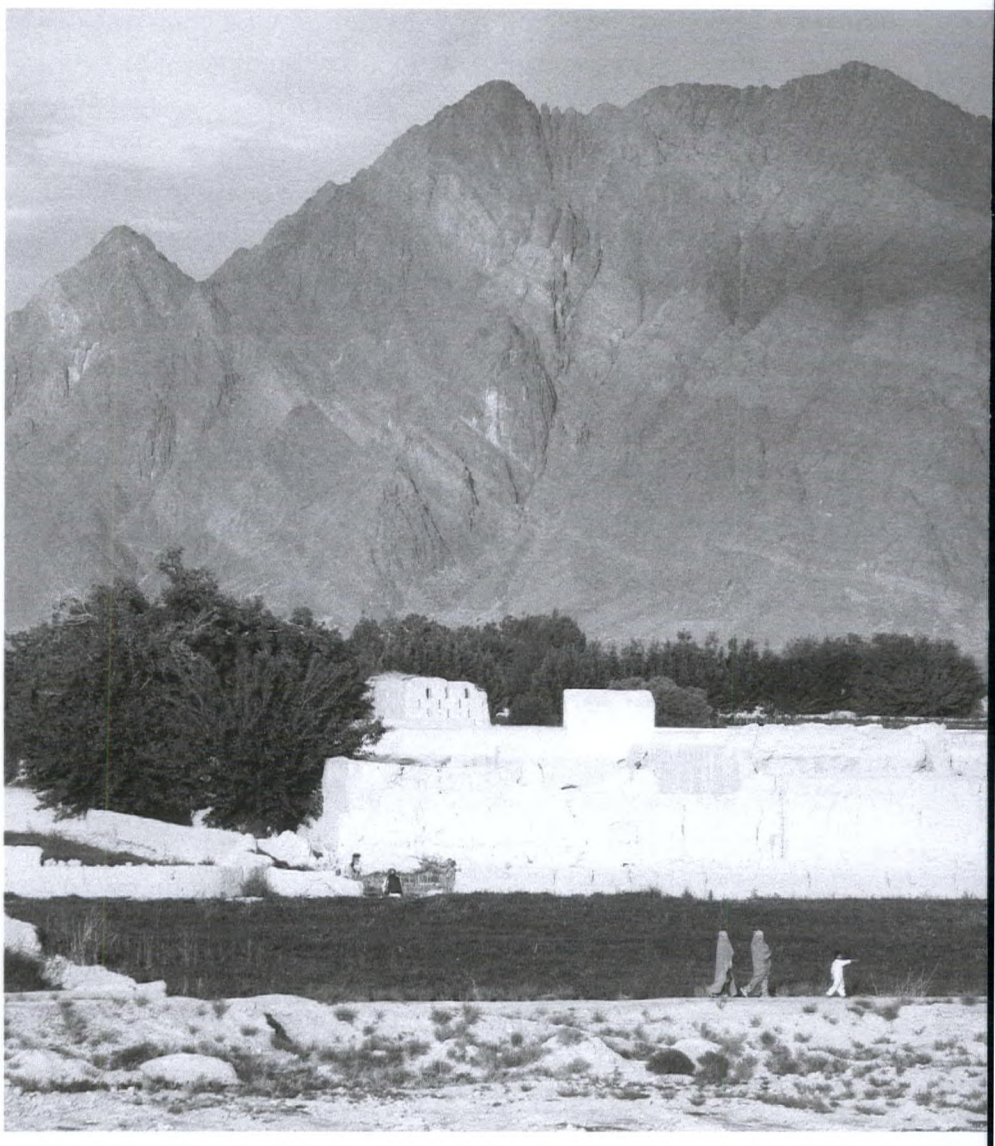
engaged in an unending cycle of buying tougher and tougher vehicles in an effort to keep its soldiers safe. In 2004, the open-topped Iltis jeep was replaced with the slightly tougher Mercedes G-Wagon, which was soon up-armoured but didn't last much beyond 2006 before it was restricted to base duty after many soldiers lost lives and limbs. Then came the introduction of the RG-31 Nyala which was thought to be pretty safe itself until the insurgents adapted to the new challenge and started to achieve catastrophic kills even on that vehicle, such as the attack in July 2007 that killed six Canadians.

While new vehicles are constantly being tested, there are no panaceas. Afghan insurgents recently managed to destroy a United States Marine MRAP (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected), commonly thought to be the toughest patrol vehicle ever made.

A few years ago, the U.S. military conducted a no-holds-barred assessment of their options for defeating the IED threat in Iraq. Its conclusion: Build a U.S.-only road network through the country, a suggestion so impractical that it basically amounts to admitting there is no useful solution.

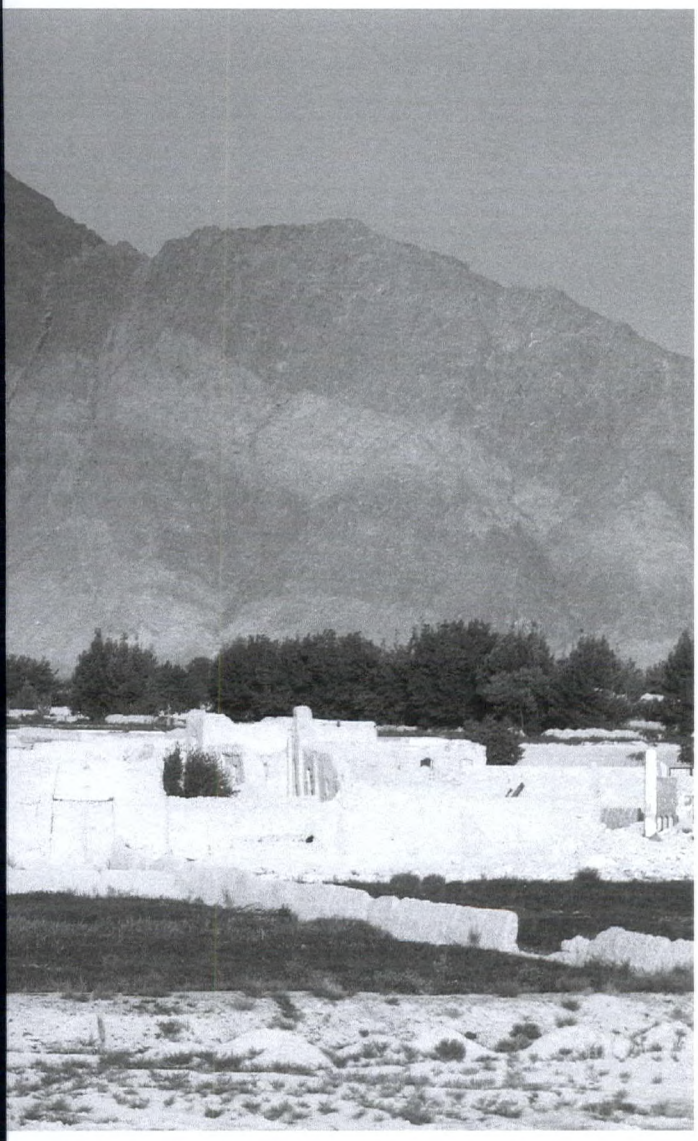
As a weapons system, IEDs are fiendishly ingenious. Not only is it hard to stop the bombers, but the bombs have far-reaching strategic and tactical effects. The strategic effect is clear. Each Canadian killed means bad headlines and another funeral and one more blow against the Canadian public's perception of the mission. Beyond the trauma of the boom, it is this strategic effect that is most dangerous. It is literally a death by a thousand cuts.

In addition to the convoys that get hit and the soldiers who get blown up, the IEDs have other more tactical effects. The threat of IEDs limits and shapes almost every single aspect of every single operation the Canadian battle group in Kandahar might hope to conduct because they radically restrict freedom of movement through the Afghan countryside. Any kind of move off the few main routes requires a painfully slow route-clearing



operation and/or just simply staying off the roads all together and busting through farmers' fields. Neither option is very good.

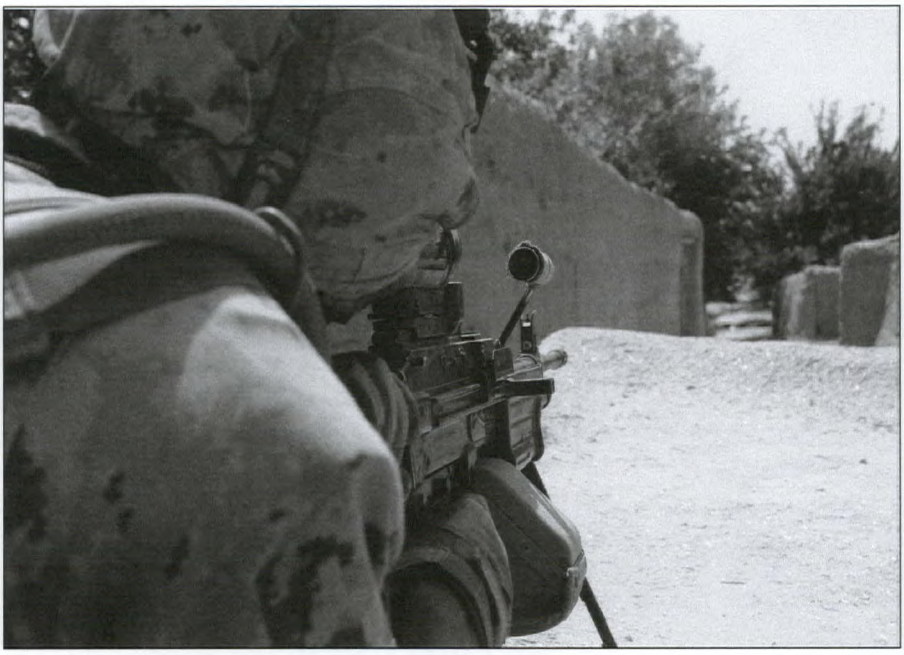
The movement-limiting effects of the IEDs have an impact beyond just the military. The bombs force road closures in the worst cases, which leaves whole villages basically deserted; but even when the roads remain open they have an effect on the normal flow of traffic necessary for markets to



Sperwan Ghar, April 2008.

remain open, for farmers to get their crops into the cities and for normal development to occur.

Part of the difficulty in stopping the IED threat is that the regular forces don't really have the necessary capabilities. Infantry are good at holding ground, but their numbers mean they're not well-suited to stopping the IED cells from doing their work. That's not to say they're just helplessly



The area around Haji was largely deserted, which made everyone uneasy.

rumbling around Kandahar province waiting to get blown up, but the main force isn't really set up to conduct the kind of intelligence collection and investigative combat necessary to disrupt the insurgents.

Starting in 2008, an almost entirely new entity was born into the Canadian war-fighting system. It's called the Counter-IED task force (C-IED) and its mission is to stop the bombers.

The C-IED task force officially stood up when former Chief of Defence Staff Rick Hillier signed a directive creating the new organization. And while they're not exactly secret, they're certainly not looking for too much attention either.

Colonel Omer Lavoie was appointed to be the first commander of the C-IED unit. Lavoie was a fitting choice for the job as it would have been a real challenge to find another senior CF officer that had seen the many faces of the insurgency in Afghanistan as Lavoie did during his time leading the Canadian battle group there in 2006-2007.

Based at National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa, Lavoie is in charge of nothing less than trying to crack the core of the insurgency in Kandahar province.

The hard kernel of the C-IED mission isn't all that tough to grasp: There are huge networks of people behind these bombs. There are financiers. There are guys who supply and build the bombs, guys transporting them, planting them and guys detonating them. The C-IED task force is attacking this network.

In many ways, the offensive against the IED network could be considered the central front in this unconventional war. If C-IED succeeds, the mission succeeds, because the 'network' behind the bombs is pretty much synonymous with the insurgency itself. "A lot of good work has gone into neutralizing an IED once it's found or mitigating the blast of an IED if it goes off, but we wanted to shift that focus from being device-centric to going after the networks that were planting the IEDs in the first place," said Lavoie. "We're trying to start targeting the networks and preventing and detecting IEDs long before they're ever even in place. So it's all about bringing the fight 'left of the boom.'"

What Lavoie and his team are doing is attacking the enemy's strategy, responding to an unconventional attack with unconventional forces. "We are attacking the network. And that means everything from going after the very, very high level targets within the IED systems, from the financiers and suppliers right down to the local level; who's the triggerman and the guy who's digging the hole in the side of the road?"

Attacking the network is all about gathering intelligence. Accordingly, the C-IED task force is heavily laden with secret-acronym agencies like CSE (Communications Security Establishment, Canada's electronic spies), CSIS (Canadian Security Intelligence Service, normal spies), Joint Task Force 2 (JTF2) and Canadian Special Operations Regiment (CSOR) (military special

operations forces) and others. "We're detecting and predicting where these things are and, more importantly, where these things are being made, how they're being financed and transported, so that we can intercept them at that level, using both conventional forces and special operations forces," said Lavoie.

The basic idea is that the C-IED task force gathers the intelligence and then raids the bad guys, killing or capturing the insurgents responsible for creating the IEDs.

Though issues of secrecy prevent the C-IED task force from revealing much of its work in Kandahar, it's still possible to make a rough estimate of how this network attack works in practice. The first step is IED awareness. New troops coming into the theatre are briefed by the C-IED squad, with the idea being that if troops discover an IED, then the C-IED squad should be alerted and the IED should be watched until the squad arrives. Once they do, the squad's EOD (Explosive Ordnance Disposal) technicians defuse the bomb and then, either on site or back at a lab, examine it for clues about its origins.

Then, using a combination of police-style crime scene investigation and military-style intelligence work, the unit builds up a picture of who made the bomb, who paid for the bomb to be made, where the materials to make the bomb came from, where the money came from and who might have organized the whole network. They build this picture using any and all means available, from human informants to interrogations of detainees, to examining financial records and to electronic signal interceptions from spy satellites high in the sky.

The next step is to disrupt the network. If they can figure out where the bombs are being made, special forces will raid the site. If they can locate a financier, they will try to kill or capture him. If they can find out where the raw bomb-making materials are coming from, they will interdict the supply.

Since it's so hard to stop the bombs once they're in the hands of the local insurgents, and impossible to keep soldiers safe once they're in the ground, then moving the fight 'left of the boom' is the only tactical choice, despite the difficulty.

While Lavoie wouldn't relate any specific details about the ongoing operations, he did make it clear that the battle was ongoing. "I'm not going to give any trade secrets away because the Taliban can read the magazine like everybody else can," he said. "So without getting into specifics, we have certainly conducted C-IED operations in-theatre where networks have been targeted, and we were successful when we conducted operations. We took out cells of guys who were building IEDs."

The C-IED organization has a squadron deployed in Kandahar under the command of a major. Back in 2008, the man in charge of the C-IED squadron was Major Dan Shaver.

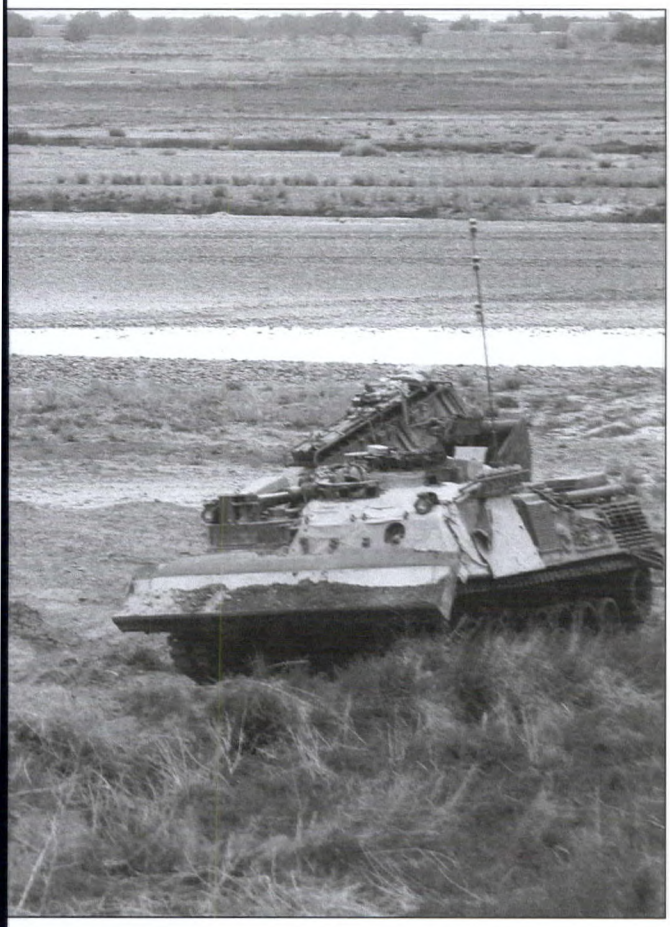
As Lavoie described it, Shaver functions as an 'arms adviser' to the battle group commander in much the same way that an artillery commander or combat engineer commander would.

In addition though, as Shaver said during a briefing last year in Kandahar, the C-IED squadron also runs its own operations and does its own thing. "Why do IEDs pose such a challenge?" asked Shaver. "First of all they are unlike conventional munitions. IEDs can be made from homemade explosives. They can be both electric and non-electric. There's a whole series of methods of initiation. There's some that are victim-operated, some that are command-operated and timed; they are usually the main categories. And it's a highly variable weapon which has proved to be very challenging."

Shaver compares the network to a crime syndicate. For Shaver, the key to unravelling the syndicate is to piece together an intelligence picture largely built on information gathered from bombsites.

At the core of the C-IED squadron are the EOD teams, the wildly brave guys in bomb suits that creep up on the jury-rigged bombs and defuse them so they can be studied for clues. "What that exploitation does is create intelligence – technical and tactical intelligence – which allows us to figure out who these guys are that are building the bombs," explained Shaver. "And these are the guys we really want to go after. The guy who handles the trigger is the low man on the totem pole. The guys who really drive this type of attack are the suppliers, the financiers and the transporters. That's where we want to be fighting."

Despite the new focus on attacking the network of IED planting insurgents, Canadians are still dying. As Lavoie notes, there is no panacea to the



In April 2008, it seemed the tanks were mainly used as up-armoured route clearance vehicles.

IED problem and, indeed, the effort to counter the IED network is essentially the same as cracking the insurgency itself. Meanwhile, every Canadian death is a victory for the bad guys.

"At the strategic level, it's a problem," said Lavoie. "They're not going to defeat us at the tactical level with IEDs, just like they couldn't defeat us at the tactical level with ambushes or anything else because they just don't have the command and control structure; and they have so many weaknesses in their system that they're never going to beat us at the tactical level. So, clearly they're trying to defeat us at the strategic level. And every soldier we lose over there is a huge loss and tragedy and they're trying to wear down the national support for the operation in this way.

"I don't think it's a surprise that right now the number one enemy tactic that's hurting and killing our soldiers is the IEDs. And the statistics sadly support that. So I think the public needs to know that the CF and the government are taking a very proactive approach. And that's why this capability was stood up, so that it's not a matter of soldiers just rolling the dice every time they go outside the wire, hoping it's not going to be a bad day. It's now very proactive. We are trying to stop these IEDs from being laid in the first place. It's important that the public knows about this, as we clearly recognize that our success relies on public support."

While the long-term prospects for success are mixed, Lavoie does hope that eventually the task of taking down the IED networks can become an Afghan operation, and one that is based more on police work and legal prosecutions in court instead of soldiers kicking doors down and shooting people. "In the end, we probably won't beat the insurgents with bullets and bombs. So once a relatively secure environment has been reached or stabilized over there, how are you going to ultimately beat them? If you can give the Afghans, especially the kids, better options for the future – a good economy, good government, a bit of development – and make the next generations feel they have other choices than to support insurgents. That's the goal."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
THE LIFE (AND DEATH) OF ERIN DOYLE

After many attempts to convey a stronger sense of the mission – and its cost – to readers back in Canada, I decided to take a different approach. Rather than focus on an operation or a strategy or a place, I'd focus on a person. I met Doyle a few times and he was an impressive character. When I heard he was killed in August, long after I'd returned to Canada, I knew that trying to tell his story would be a good way to help readers understand a little more about Afghanistan. And while his wife Nicole was not easily convinced, once onboard she became the story's greatest champion and that it was told at all is because of her.[4]

[4] The story appeared in Legion Magazine in March, 2009.

Master Corporal Erin Doyle talks with a member of the Afghan National Police on patrol near Haji Beach, April 2008.

The Canadian army has a policy on facial hair. Moustaches are OK, but beards are pretty much forbidden without medical cause and even then growing anything longer than the allowed one inch is a sure way to bring a crusty sergeant major down on your own personal head.

It is called a 'jacking.' And it's what happens in the Canadian Forces when a superior officer has some kind of issue with you, or with your beard.

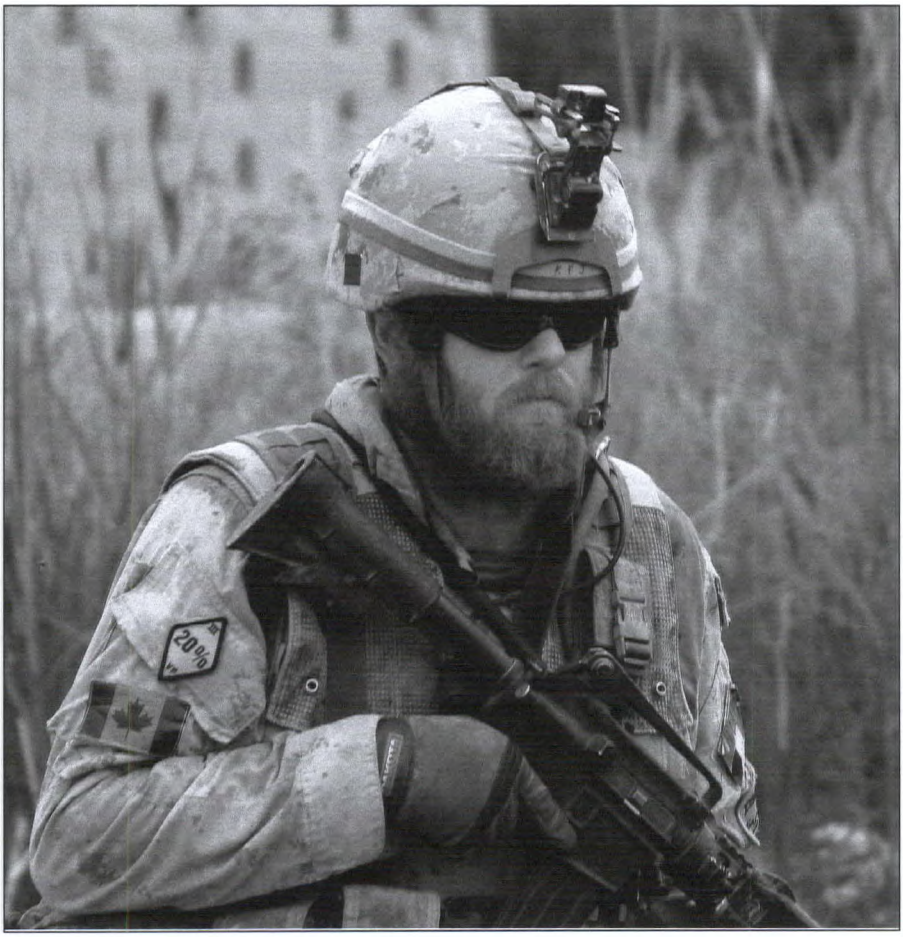
Master Corporal Erin Doyle was not worried about getting jacked. He was, in fact, legendarily unworried about getting jacked. He may have been, to be honest, the least jacking-averse soldier in the entire CF.

Seriously, he seemed to like getting jacked. It didn't really matter what the rank was doing the jacking, either; from sergeant to colonel, Doyle was as unworried about rank as he was about getting in trouble. I met Doyle, who was with the 3rd Battalion, PPCLI, a couple of times in Panjwayi in April 2008 and he made a singular – sort of scary – impression.

Doyle was a tattooed and wildly bearded giant. He had the unmistakable swagger of a man for whom solid rules were mere suggestions. He had a way of leaning into a stare that could make anyone nervous. Hell, he didn't just look at you, he estimated you. It was a look that seemed to leave everyone, even officers, feeling a little less than certain. It was an interesting effect, and I'm not sure where he learned it – some kind of finishing school for outlaws maybe.

The first time I saw him, he was quite literally presiding over a meeting between two sets of patrol leaders – one captain and one sergeant – during a long and arduous hike in the deep outback of western Panjwayi.

The captain and sergeant would make plans, then kind of quietly look up at Doyle. With a headshake and a grunt, he'd torpedo their idea and



Master Corporal Erin Doyle on patrol near Haji Beach, April 2008.

they'd go back to the map. This went on for half an hour or more, as gunfire and explosions rippled overhead. With his rank obscured by his gear – his battle rattle – I assumed he was a warrant officer or maybe the company sergeant major, based solely on the deference and respect he received from the other soldiers, many of whom I knew to be cynics of the first order.

When the planning conference broke up, I hurried to get up to where Doyle was, figuring I was better off standing near him than anywhere else. "This is bullshit," Doyle growled at me as the two patrols finally moved off in the direction of the police sub-station at Zangabad, where he was then

stationed. "Somebody thinks it's a live-fire patrol exercise out here – on a two-way range."

He had a point. There was patrolling with intent to achieve a tactical purpose and then there was walking in circles in brain-shrinking heat simply to prolong the patrol to its preordained length. This was now clearly the latter. "What's that patch mean?" I asked him as we walked, pointing at the symbol on his shoulder that featured the text '20%.'

Doyle explained that during a pre-deployment speech, the sergeant major complained that 100 per cent of the problems in their unit were caused by 20 per cent of the soldiers. He said it in a much more profane way than that, however.

Some guys, I thought, would hear that speech and silently tick off the troublemakers in his mind, some would smile inside knowing they may well belong to that club, some would embrace it by smiling openly and calling themselves a 20 per center; and then some, probably a very few, maybe only one, would go out and get 20% patches made and have his whole platoon wear them into combat.

That last guy – that was Doyle.

But there was way more to him than just being a bad-ass among bad-asses, as I learned the second time I met him a few days later. Not only was he the most impossibly polite outlaw you could imagine, being friendly to even outcast journalists, but the respect with which everyone treated him turned out to have an incredibly strong and undeniable basis in fact.

On that day in late April, Doyle and his section had patrolled several hours down to PSS Haji – the place where he was eventually killed – in order to take over for another section that was being pulled out of the field.

The enemy – nothing if not superbly unpredictable – chose to attack at the moment when more than 200 coalition soldiers were converging on Haji. In the resultant chaos, Doyle and his section were ordered to load the withdrawing platoon's massive pile of equipment onto a truck while the rest of the convoy lay pretty much belly-up in a sandstorm on the Arghandab riverbed.

Now, we've all moved heavy boxes before and it's not exactly fun. Doyle was already sick – with Afghan hanta virus, as he called it – but that didn't stop him. He jumped up and moved boxes with his troops. And he moved them way past the point where any normal person would have stopped. He moved them until he nearly died.

No, really. I'm not just saying that. He moved boxes until he passed out and his vital signs got so bad the medic came over the radio saying he was unsure if Doyle would live and requested an emergency nine-liner medevac back to Kandahar Airfield.

No one who knew Doyle is surprised by this story. Troops were in danger so he pushed past all of the body's normal warning signs because a job had to be done. It's just what it was.

Doyle made it back to Kandahar and with the help of a tasty intravenous buffet, he survived the day. He would not survive the war.

Numberless Are the Dead

Numbers are numbers, they tell you something but it's probably nothing vital. There is no code hidden in the numbers, nothing to tell you whether the war was just or if the man was loved or what life now feels like for the people he left behind.

Nonetheless, maybe big digits do tell some kind of story too; so here are some rough numbers. Doyle was the 90th Canadian soldier to die in

Master Corporal Erin Doyle on patrol near Haji Beach, April 2008.

Afghanistan since 2002. And he was approximately the 2,100th Canadian to die in the service of his country since the end of the Second World War, and very nearly the 118,000th soldier to have his name listed in the official Books of Remembrance since Canada first sent armed men overseas in 1884 to fight alongside the British in Sudan.

Beyond the numbers stands the other story. It's Doyle's story. And even more, it is the story of his wife Nicole, his friends and comrades and the unimaginable cost of losing someone – one man – at war. These are the people whose world changed when Doyle died. And it's not now a better world.

The News Comes Quickly

The way they still speak about him in the present tense is one of the things you'll notice if you talk to his friends.

Master Corporal Matt Yaschuk, one of Doyle's best friends, is not the kind of guy who normally sits down for interviews with journalists, you can tell just by looking at him. But yet, on a freezing cold December day in Edmonton he sat patiently, waiting for me, wearing a blue plaid jacket and a toque, his hugely muscled arms protectively cuddling a little Tim Horton's coffee.

Yaschuk was in the 3rd Battalion with Doyle, the same company, and had been for years. The two of them had been through a lot together. From Bosnia in 2000 to Kabul in 2004, they'd seen pretty much everything.

Yaschuk was at FOB Sperwan Ghar, sleeping in on that early morning in August when Doyle's section of about 10 guys – at that time holding the Haji base all on their own – came under attack.

Normally when a soldier is killed, the news is spread out to the unit all at once, as soon as possible. But in this case, because everybody knew Doyle and Yaschuk were so tight, he was told first. "A warrant officer came in and woke me up," said Yaschuk. "He just asked me to come with him. And I knew there was a contact going on because I could hear the guns firing; but there's always contact, rounds going out all the time, so you get used to that."

The warrant officer took Yaschuk outside and told him Doyle was dead and that the fight was still going on. "He told me that Erin was killed. And then I felt like shit," said Yaschuk sternly, with something that seemed stronger than reluctance. " I just lost one of my best friends and there's not much you could do. He's out there and you're in here. You wish that you were out there with him."

Yaschuk was among the first of Doyle's close friends and family to hear of his death. Many others still hadn't heard, like Nicole, his wife of 11 years, or his daughter Zarine or his many friends or the rest of Canada, even.

It didn't take long for Yaschuk's higher-ups to tell him he would be going back to Kandahar with Doyle in order to follow his coffin up the ramp of the Hercules and escort his body back to Canada. " I was happy I was going with him. It's the biggest honour I've ever had in my life," said Yaschuk, looking down at his coffee. "But at the same time, I was pretty broken."

Yaschuk and Doyle rode on the Hercules back to Camp Mirage, a nearby Canadian base, before transferring to a Canadian Airbus for the flight back to Trenton.

He remembers sitting quietly those many long hours, separated from Doyle by a draped curtain.

Waiting for Doyle and Yaschuk on the tarmac in Trenton alongside Nicole and Zarine were two other members of the tight 3rd Battalion crew, Master Corporal Gerry Fraser and Master Corporal Kevin Nanson, both of whom had been on this tour with Doyle only to be seriously injured and evacuated to Canada.

Not incidentally, many who witnessed the scene believe Doyle probably saved Nanson's life after the IED strike in which Nanson was so badly injured; but more on that later.

"It was emotional," remembered Yaschuk. " Very emotional. Especially with Gerry being hurt."

Fraser had been repatriated after suffering major injuries in a vehicle accident in Kandahar City.

The three – Yaschuk, Nanson and Fraser – remember standing together on the tarmac in Trenton when all of a sudden it seemed like their endlessly mischievous friend Doyle was still with them.

See, Doyle used to love pranks. Whether it was duct-taping rotten yogurt

to a guy's locker or sending truly illicit emails from a friend's accidentally left-open account, Doyle could always be counted on to cause trouble. So, when Chief of the Defence Staff General Walter Natynczyk approached the trio and said, quietly, conspiratorially, "Would it mean anything at all if I said to you 'Hey —!'"

What Natynczyk said will forever remain a mystery to all but those who knew Doyle, but it may be enough to say that it was Erin's favourite politically incorrect greeting.

The trio just shook their heads and laughed. It was as if Doyle had gotten them yet again, in the most unlikely way possible.

What had actually happened was that Natynczyk had asked Nicole if there was anything at all he could do for her. She figured the boys could use a good laugh, so she put him up to it.

Nicole and Erin

Nicole Doyle doesn't let many people call her Nick, and if you try for 'Nicky' you'd better have some sort of armour-plating system to protect your softer organs from attack.

Nicole is in the forces too. Currently a corporal in the air force, she's been to Afghanistan before and she's going back again.

Beyond that, she seems to share something way down inside with Erin: a love of mischief with a hard edge, impatience with weakness and a strict policy of never, ever abiding fools.

During my second interview with Nicole, I asked her a question that I'd already asked a few days earlier. Nicole glanced over, then down at the ground. "You suck," she said quietly. "You already know that answer."

She was right, of course.

As the war erupts all around us, Doyle (left) plots a way out.

ISAF

The issue of when Nicole and Erin first met isn't all that easy to resolve, but they were definitely married on April 25, 1997. (I know this for sure because I asked this question twice.)

When Nicole was young, she moved out near the Westsyde area of Kamloops, British Columbia.

She remembers her school bus would stop on Dairy Road and pick up this red-headed kid who was always acting boisterous and wild. Later, Nicole remembers watching the same red-headed kid play football at Westsyde Secondary School.

After school was done, Nicole joined the Rocky Mountain Rangers reserve unit in Kamloops and it was there she and Erin, well, got married. "We went to one party and shortly after there was another party," said Nicole. "There was no linking up or nothing, it was just hanging out.

"We just went to this party together. We weren't together or anything. We were both leaning against the lockers and someone came up and congratulated us on getting engaged. We're just like, 'Thanks!'

"But we just looked at each other and said, 'What was that about?' Apparently we're engaged. And then we both just looked at each other and he goes, 'Well, why don't we?' And I was like, 'OK.'"

And just like that, without even a kiss, they were engaged.

"Then the next day we went to The Fox and Hounds," she said, referring to a local pub in Kamloops. "That's where we kissed before we got married. So it was checked out. And that weekend we went and got married," Nicole added with a laugh. "He was that good, he was that nice and I just saw that he was awesome. He had a huge heart. He was awesome."

After having rings tattooed on their fingers, the two were married in a brief ceremony at a commissionaire's house before having to run off to a military exercise in Kelowna, where, as Nicole said, the government paid for a hotel room – their honeymoon.

"Maybe it was kind of weird, but it was pretty cool," she said of their brief engagement, smiling. "I just knew. It's not something stupid, like no big production happens. It's just something about a person: you know.

"We'd worked together so we had conversations about stuff and we both matched on a lot – and what we differed on was good enough. You're not supposed to be the same. You're supposed to be your own individual. He was such a redneck guy, NASCAR kind of guy and he just killed me; he was pretty funny.

"He was such a boy-boy man and half the shit he did, I was just shaking my head laughing. I was like, 'I can't believe you thought you'd get away with that.' And he'd just look at me and go, 'Love me, I'm cute.' I'd say, 'No, you're not.'

"That was his big thing, 'Love me, I'm cute.' No, but I think I'll keep you anyway.

"No one we knew thought it would last, but we made it right until the day he died. Eleven years."

Perhaps not surprisingly, Erin's sense of mischief spread into his sense of romance. Nicole remembers going on exercises only to come back to find that "... he'd have gone into my tent space to gun-tape a rose to my pillow or something. So every time I came back there was something like a teddy bear. And I'd get mad because it was dark and I'd say, 'Who the hell threw their shit on my bed?' And it wasn't that, it was a present from him to me. I'm just like, 'Oh, my, God,' because I wasn't really the girly kind of person."

Erin was 21 when they married and Nicole was 26. Her daughter Zarine was five.

Over the next few years Erin would become a fixture in Zarine's life. Whether it was when Zarine accidentally lost one eyebrow to an unfortunate over-plucking incident and Erin did what had to be done, with his beard and all his tattoos, going out to shop for appropriate makeup; or later, when Zarine would bring home boyfriends and Erin would be waiting in the garage to check them out.

"He was a great gift to me," said Nicole. "That's for sure. I didn't deserve him that much. He was really good. He was perfect. That's it. He was."

She stopped talking. There was a pause.

"It's OK. I just miss him a lot."

Nicole, in her preternatural calm, seems to see it all from some great height, from what is perhaps a distance necessary now for her to get by. "I just need to get an everyday life going. It's hard enough getting up to go to work and stuff and to not want to just sit at home. It takes quite a bit. But I've never been one to be like that, and a lot of people know me because of that. But it's hard to keep that going when you've got people always standing in front of you kind of pitying you. Because, like Erin, I have no problem telling you: 'OK, f--k off – enough already.' That's the way I am. But it's hard to move on."

And as for the men who killed Doyle, Nicole is dealing with that, too.

"It's just what happens in war. It's not personal," she said, but added with a twinkle in her eye. "But there's karma, I'm sure of it. And they'll get theirs. They'll get what's coming to them."

Doyle's friends, the soldiers, mostly agree; but with a small twist.

"It's war. It's not personal," said Master Corporal Bruce Otto, who spent time with Doyle in Bosnia. "That said, if I ran into those three guys on the street," he continued, very quietly, as if he didn't want anyone to hear, "I'd kill them all on sight."

Too Far From Civility

Most of the time in the military a person's rank means a lot – pretty much everything. The whole system is rigged so that a certain kind of soldier gets promoted, and it often works; but there's a fine line between obedience and passiveness.

In some places, like out in the heavy clench of a tiny Canadian outpost in Panjwayi, for example, it seems like a different kind of order takes over.

Out there in the mess, conducting what one officer called doctorate-level counter-insurgency operations in a place no longer ruled by the kind of civility senior officers were feeling back at Kandahar Airfield, guys like Doyle rose to a prominence all out of whack with their actual rank.

Captain Reg McMichael was Doyle's platoon commander during the tour. McMichael is a full half-decade younger than Doyle (and many inches shorter) and he recalls that "... as a commander you want guys like Doyle because there are soldiers that you trust and there are soldiers that you lead. He was a soldier I trusted, so I often found myself, not deferring, but I found myself seeking his guidance on things that a captain wouldn't normally seek guidance from a master corporal on.

"I trusted his perspective on what was going on. I trusted that there would be no bullshit. I trusted that he wouldn't lie. I trusted that he didn't care what I thought of what he said – that he was just going to tell me the honest information. What he told you was exactly what he thought. You knew where you stood based solely on what he would say. There were no games."

Now, that's not to say that McMichael and Doyle always got along perfectly. Doyle, being Doyle, loved to screw with those in authority until they managed to earn his respect.

McMichael remembers, quite clearly, the first time he met Doyle, when he took command of the platoon as a lieutenant.

As McMichael says, he'd already seen Doyle's picture on the regiment website and knew he was a handful, but he wasn't expecting the welcome he got. "I walked into the platoon office and he was sitting there. He looked up at me and said, 'Get the f--k out of here.'

"So I did."

McMichael then sought some advice from another officer, who told him to go back in and sort Doyle out.

"So I walked back into the office and Doyle said, 'I told you to f--k off.'

"And I said, 'Go f--k yourself!' And that's how it started."

"He was a pretty big paradox," said McMichael. "You look at him and see the huge bushy beard, which definitely provoked people, and right on, you know, the big tattooed biker guy who doesn't really fit into the norm of the clean-cropped, clean-shaven young soldier that we generally stamp up on posters – but nobody could really argue with how competent he was.

"It was weird because he would go from the rough, cursing, angry, Viking barbarian to the quiet, mannered, polite ambassador of Canadian foreign policy in a ravaged land. And I don't know, it's funny, but it's that big dichotomy of soldiers that we want them to be capable of so much, yet crammed into the gentleman. Though with Doyle the gentleman was a bit harder to find sometimes, that's the way he was.

"He had this really, like, mischievous smirk on all the time; kind of like that knowing, ha, ha, ha sort of deal. Like he knew a joke you didn't. And you wanted to know the joke. But he always would do that even when rounds were coming in. I remember distinctly him standing in these shitty shorts that he had on, up on the tower shooting, and he's looking back, and he's like, 'Hey, can you see over the wall, boss?' while the rounds are hitting the other side of the wall. And I'm like, 'You're a dick,' and he's like, 'I can get you a platform if you want.' It was always that kind of stuff.

"And if I didn't handle it well, he would say I was spinning. He always used to do that to me. 'Hey, you look like you're a little stressed right now. Are you allowed to get stressed?' It was funny because it turned into this whole thing, like, 'I have to look totally disassociated from what's going on so that Erin doesn't make fun of me.' As that was more upsetting than actually getting shot at, which is weird."

The Viking Goes Priority Echo

McMichael was in the operations room at Sperwan Ghar listening as Doyle's section fought off a concerted insurgent attack out at substation Haji.

He listened as the section's sergeant gave battle reports over the radio, as artillery was called in, as bombers were called in, and then he listened in horror as another call came in. Men had been hit. There was someone wounded. A nine-liner medevac was called in priority Alpha, which meant it was urgent. Then another was called in priority Echo, which meant, well, dead.

They don't use names on the radio, so they had to wait for the identifying Zap numbers to follow. Everybody in the room gasped as they heard, "R69194106" crackle through the speaker.

It was Doyle, and McMichael simply couldn't believe it.

Erin Doyle, left, plots an escape route.

A few hours later, and a full world away, Nicole was waiting for Erin to get on the Internet for her goodnight chat session. He didn't show up on time. "It was weird because the time wasn't right – midnight had passed and normally that's when he has time to talk to me," Nicole remembered.

"I'm used to him not meeting the timings, it doesn't always match up; but this one felt weird. And then the phone rang at 1:30 in the morning. I was just like, 'That's not right.'

"I answered the phone and it was the (battalion) commanding officer and he said, 'Is this Nicole Doyle, Mrs. Nicole Doyle?' I said, 'Yes.'

"He says, 'We need to come to your house.'

"I said, 'What happened?'

"I said, 'Is he alive or is he dead?'

"And he said, 'We need to come to your house, we can't tell you over the phone.'"

Nicole asked them where they were and they told her they were five minutes down the road. She went out the front door and looked down the road and they were parked a block away. Then their headlights came on and they drove up to her house.

"And I went in the house and they came in. I just looked at the CO and I said, 'Is he alive or dead?' And he said, 'I'm sorry.'

"And I said, 'Was it quick? What happened?'"

He told her it was quick.

"Everything just goes through your head. Just insane. It was just like it was so complete. I don't know how to explain it. It was unbelievable for a bit, and then it was like, knowing the life, I just thought, 'Well, it has to be true. They wouldn't be standing here.'"

Then Nicole started making phone calls.

Stories from the Field

There are many reasons to become a soldier. Some probably do it for the adventure, some maybe for the money, and some because they don't have anything better to do.

But for some guys, it seems like they have no choice, or rather that they had no choice. Whether they fit in there or not, whether they do it right or not, they are soldiers because somewhere a long time ago they decided that's who they were. They are committed to the idea, you could say. Doyle seems to have decided to become a soldier sometime around the time he was born. Or at least that's the conclusion you could come to if you saw his childhood collection of playing cards which, aside from a few topless girls, were primarily the rare, but quite cool, Desert Storm cards commemorating the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

While Doyle may have questioned anything, or everything, he also knew where the questions had to stop and action had to start.

Early on in the tour, he came upon a scene just near the Zangabad base where his friend Master Corporal Kevin Nanson had been badly injured in an IED strike and was currently laying still inside the damaged Nyala patrol vehicle.

Doyle waited as long as he could, but things were happening too slowly. He sprung into action, taking control of the scene, getting Nanson help and calling in a medevac.

For his part, Nanson remembers lying on the ground, looking up at Doyle who'd been called over to calm the wounded man by one of the medics.

Nanson remembers seeing the sun come through Doyle's beard. Nanson tried to speak to his friend, but his teeth were blown out and his lungs were filling with blood.

Doyle wanted to reassure his buddy, so he punched him in the chest and told him he'd be all right.

"Normally I wouldn't have minded," said Nanson, smiling. "But my back was broken at the time, so ..."

Despite the extra pain, Nanson has nothing but unending admiration for his friend and is now trying to start a Christmas charity in his name in order to, as he says, somehow thank him for saving his life.

Doyle lived for his guys. That is what everyone said about him. He would have done anything for friends like Nanson, Yaschuk or Fraser, but, equally, he would have done anything for the young privates and corporals under his command.

When Doyle came home on leave in June he was in bad shape. Nicole had never seen him like this. "He was tired. He told me he had been diagnosed with typhoid. I guess he was misdiagnosed at first and jacked up for being dehydrated and then a few days later he got told something else," said Nicole.

"He said he was extremely tired. He's like, 'I just want to come home. I'm done.' When he was on leave I surprised him with a hot tub because I knew he was tired, I knew he needed to be spoiled. That's when he went and said, 'I don't want to go back, but I have to. I'm not happy.' That's when I asked him if he wanted me to go to the padre, to step in for him. He said, 'No.' I was like, 'OK'".

The End

Back in Afghanistan and back out at Haji, things had not gotten any easier for McMichael, Doyle and all the men.

Through July and into August they were in contact almost every day. When I was at Haji in April, it was held by about 25 Canadians and a whole bunch of Afghan National Police. Now it was being held by about 10 guys in total.

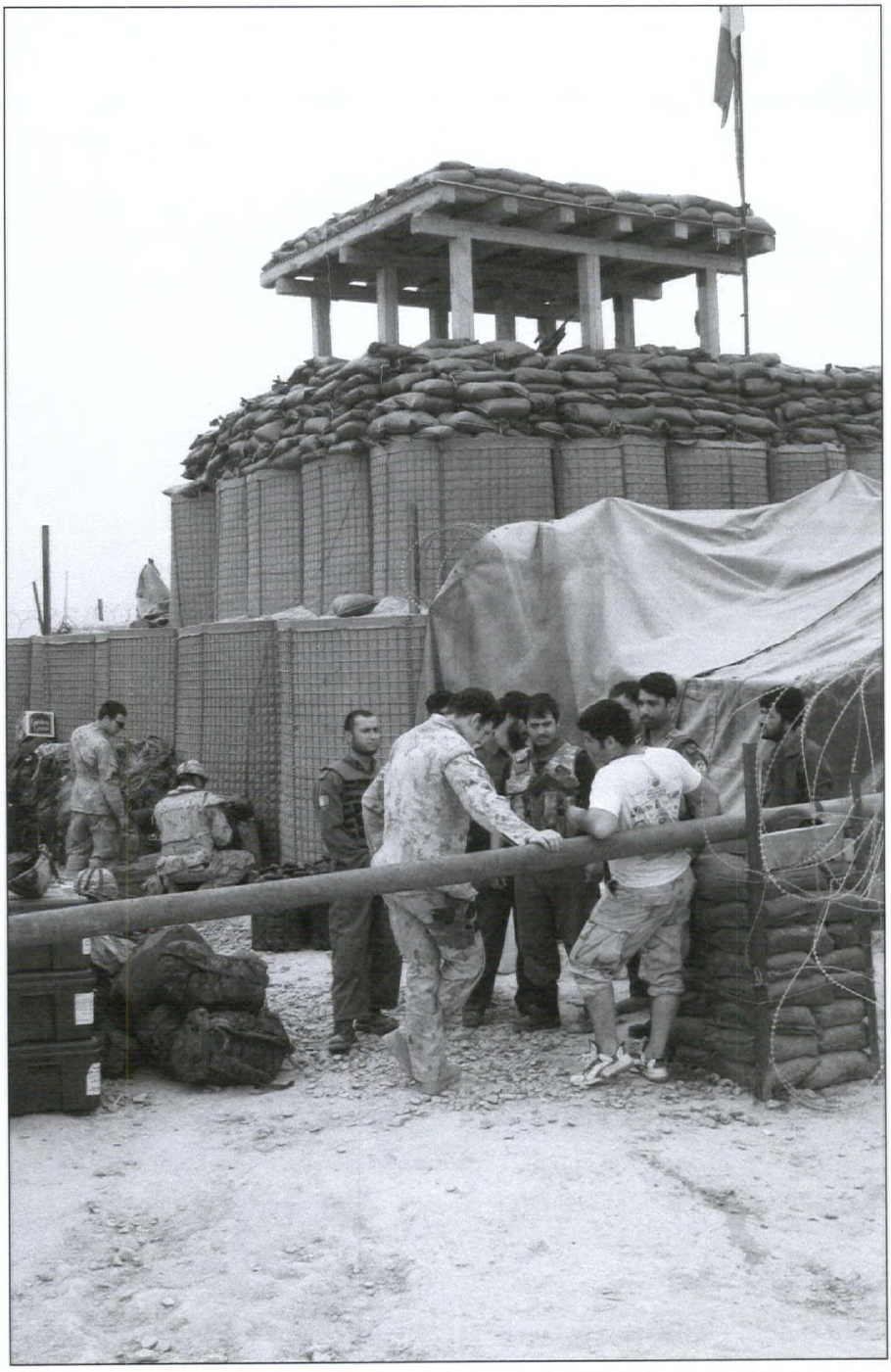
Unable to mount effective clearance patrols to keep the enemy back, they knew it was only a matter of time until the enemy came for them. And come they did. The first rounds hit the sandbagged walls of the base in the very early hours of the morning. Doyle led the charge to man the heavy C-6 machine-gun in the southernmost guard tower.

Doyle – who had the rarest talent of always appearing to have a good time, who seemingly had the idea that life is some kind of fierce party – stuck with his guns until the end.

But it was almost like the enemy knew exactly where he would be. Three rockets, fired from point-blank range, slammed into the tower and Doyle died that day. "When he got killed we all said 'Well, if he had to die, that's the way he wanted to die,'" said McMichael, choking back tears. "He died pulling the trigger. He died screaming into the face of the enemy. He died doing what every soldier wants to do. If he had to go, that's how he'd want to go, defying the enemy to the last.

"He stood against it though, you know what I mean? How many guys do you know have actually stood against evil people?" asked McMichael, gently. "He paid the ultimate sacrifice for it, but didn't he give the rest of us hope in doing that?"

It was August 11, 2008. Doyle was 32.



The guard tower at Haji Beach where Doyle was killed.

EPILOGUE: The Cost

Many of Doyle's friends had themselves tattooed in memoriam, but they didn't want to tell me about the tattoos. And they didn't, in fact. I only learned about it later.

Beyond that, as McMichael said, the loss is really "not quantifiable."

"We were stunned. I think a lot of us are still stunned. As for me, I literally can't picture the fact that he's not somewhere. You just expect to see him."

For Nicole, well, as her friends say, she's tough. But it's no easy road.

"Erin even told me, 'Just get it done and move on. Don't sit and dwell on it,'" said Nicole, recalling a conversation she had about the possibility of his death. "I just told him, 'You have no idea how hard it would be if I had to deal with this. None.'

"And I did really have a hard time and I still have my bad days but I never have been one to lie down and be kicked around. This is very hard for me because he's my best friend but I'm not one to stop living because of it.

"I have him down the road anytime I need to go see him. I know he didn't want me to dwell on it. It's just going to take time to get past all that. I've always got him around. I know he's always there.

"But the most insane thing that bothers me is having him referred to as a number. Cities of men were lost in the previous wars and they're still trying to figure out ... who certain guys were – and until someone can list off the thousands of guys that died in the last two World Wars, they have no right to keep saying that.

"I hate that with all my heart. He wasn't the 90th. He was Master Corporal Erin Melvin Doyle. He was a very good man and that's the way I want him remembered. Not as a number."

POSTSCRIPT:

Some facts about Erin Doyle:

Born: March 20, 1976, in Maple Ridge, B.C. Grew up in Kamloops.

Enlisted: May 21, 1998.

Favourite activities: restoring old trucks and cars, shovelling neighbours' sidewalks, playing pranks on friends and others.

Probable reason he was able to grow his beard so long: Doyle played Santa every year for at the PPCLI Christmas party.

Gyms now named after him: two, one at 3 Battalion, PPCLI and another at 1 Battalion, PPCLI. There was a third in Zangabad, but that base has been torn down.

He was scared of: heights, bees (he was allergic) and pretty much nothing else.

Surviving Family: Kathleen (mother), Melvin (father), Sean (brother), Barb Loukes (step-mother), Bob Mitchell (step-father) and Kerry (half-sister).

His dreams for the future included: becoming a Search and Rescue technician before retiring with Nicole to Valemount, B.C., where he wanted to pump gas.

Buried: St-Émile Cemetery, Legal, Alberta, August 21, 2008.

CONCLUSION:
COMING HOME FROM KANDAHAR

The little essay that follows was largely written in a single burst following my return from Kandahar in 2006. It begins by telling the story of a morning in mid-October in Kabul where I had been stranded by a broken-down Ariana jet and was once again dashing around the city with abandon.

On a Tuesday morning at dawn I get a ride from the Serena hotel to the Kabul International Airport (KIA) to catch my plane. It's a pretty long drive, maybe 5 km right across the city and traffic was already heavy. Nobody seems to sleep late in Kabul, but of course, nobody really stays out after dark either. There have been bombs every few days for the past month or so and lots of Americans and Afghans have been killed.

Every time we slow down, the ancient old Toyota we're in stalls out, which isn't really good. I paid for an official Serena airport shuttle but at the last second they pulled a little scam and this guy is, I think, some friend or relative of the desk clerk. He's wearing a full selection of fake western brand names, including some ridiculously shiny warm-up pants with the buttons misconnected on the right leg.

It's 5:45 a.m. and we hit a roadblock at the airport gate. We're stuck about 30 cars back, stalling frequently, just at the edge of a busy roundabout. They're not going to let us in for another 30 minutes. There are dozens of people, maybe hundreds actually, just kind of standing around on the side of the road. To be honest, I don't know much about the tactics of personal security. I mainly just try to avoid situations where I'm standing around looking like a juicy and/or defenceless target, like waiting outside KIA on the side of the highway in a civilian car. I do know how these bombers operate though. If there's one around he'll have a spotter somewhere, maybe among the people on the side of the road, looking for targets to call him in on. A stationary target is easy to hit. Especially one with a big fat Canadian head.

This all occurs to me as I'm sitting in the back seat. It's not what I want to be thinking about. I haven't had any coffee yet and I've been hanging out in a high stress war zone for the past two weeks and I just want out. But I know I have to do something.

Movement is the only option. Getting out and walking the last kilometre or so doesn't seem too wise, but once I'm past the roadblock I should be relatively safe. There are certainly bad guys watching, but it's not usually their M.O. to attack in person, at least not in Kabul. Plus, they don't know who I am. I might have a gun ... The suiciders are the real threat, so I'm safer on foot, away from their car bombers.

In a rush, I slide across the seat and get out on the curb side, away from traffic. I throw my backpack on and start walking. About a dozen cars up two older NGO-ish westerners in a Toyota pickup look at me with slightly wild eyes as I walk past their truck. "Gotta keep moving," I say. There's a certain sense of fear in the air.

I get stopped at the roadblock and decide to wait just inside, by the guards. I keep moving bit by bit and eventually I make it up to the airport. I get on my flight.

At 7:30 a.m. a bomber kills two Afghan policemen less than a kilometre from the roundabout I was sitting in.

So this is just what happens – it all comes down to a question of action: What do you do? In this case I just got up and walked. It might not have been the right thing to do and it might not have mattered, but then again, maybe it did. In Afghanistan – where threats seem to be everywhere and you could literally get smoked at any moment – you never really know exactly what to do or if it will help, so you have to play the probabilities. You'll always have imperfect knowledge of the situation, but you make up for that by trying to understand the enemy's capabilities and tactics.

But there's more here too. Understanding tactics is one thing, and strategy is another, but understanding motivation is the real key, not to staying alive in Kabul but in actually achieving our aims there. In a battle with no end and no frontlines, knowing how and why the enemy fights is crucial – and it must be attacked because there's no other way to win the war.

However, I'm not convinced we've attained that kind of understanding.

That there is a resistance in Afghanistan is beyond doubt. But it is not clear what they are resisting. Clearly the whole place is factionalized, if not disintegrated, so it's easier to focus on just one component, the south, Kandahar province, and the Pashtun-based resistance frequently referred to as Taliban. What are they resisting? Is it simply our presence? Or do they believe democracy and 'progress' is unacceptable in an Islamic state? Or are they resisting the resurgence of Tajik and Hazara tribes to power in Kabul? Or are they resisting because there's massive unemployment and the Taliban pays them to fight? Or are they resisting because they perceive life was better – more secure, more stable – under Taliban rule and they want that back? Or are they resisting because they find the current government to be corrupt and incapable of rule? Or are they resisting our demand that Afghanistan can no longer be a threat to global security by hosting terrorists and that furthermore the country must obey international human rights law?

Well, I have evidence that it's all of them. The resistance in Kandahar draws their motivation from all these reasons, and more. They plainly have more reasons to fight than we can possibly cope with. So, maybe it's useful to ask what we know about ourselves. It seems pretty clear that we can't fight this war forever. So, time is on their side. We (should) have no interest in forcing foreign values onto their cultural life (although some of us do, sadly). We want to behave morally. We believe in human rights.

But we will probably never accept that Afghanistan reverts to a place where Islamic militants train to attack us.

In the list of grievances above, the only thing we should really be willing to fight for is the last one. This appears to me to be the only thing we have a right to do and though it may require a few reforms, they aren't huge. If Kandahar province will function stably as an Islamic state-let, why should we complain? If they want to be a cross between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia using the format of the Republic of Srpska, what does it matter to us?

Everyone wants to know if the mission will succeed, but there remain some pretty serious ambiguities about what the mission actually is intending to do. If by 'the mission' one means education reform and gender equality in Panjwayi, then there's trouble. But if it means a persistent government in Kabul and a reduction or cessation in international criminal terrorism, then yes, success is not improbable. As Rick Hillier told me, the barometer for success is for regular Afghans all across the country to have the feeling, if not the certainty, that the government in Kabul will survive despite whatever attacks may come.

The key to winning is to know the enemy and know ourselves. To know what winning looks like. And that understanding is much harder to find than it may seem.

But that is the crucial thing – understanding. And on that note, there is an important phenomenon to be considered when thinking about our role in places like Afghanistan, and it is this – it is almost impossible to understand what's happening unless you're there, on the ground. To make wise decisions, or wise recommendations, you need a great deal of evidence to construct a realistic model of the situation in order to understand how it's likely to evolve. That evidence isn't just statistical; it's more like context; it's so much information that it would take, in the case of Afghanistan, literally days to transmit using spoken language. The complexity is nearly irreducible, is what I'm saying. It is almost like the proverbial map of the territory at 1:1 scale – an informative explanation of the situation would be almost as complex as the situation itself.

At this point, it's hard to be anything but agnostic on the future of Afghanistan. There is not enough evidence to decide either way. And while it may be naïve to believe that change will always be harmonious, forcing too high a rate of change may be counterproductive, too.

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WITNESS TO WAR

BY ADAM DAY

WITNESS TO WAR CAPTURES CANADA'S EVOLVING MILITARY ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS – FROM PEACEKEEPING IN KABUL IN 2004 TO BLAZING COMBAT IN 2006, TO TREACHEROUS AND DIFFICULT COUNTER-INSURGENCY IN 2008 AND 2009. THE COLLECTED REPORTS AND STORIES CONTAINED IN THIS VOLUME ARE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A JOURNALIST WHO COVERED THE ACTION DURING THIS TIME. THIS GIVES THE READER A SOLDIERS-EYE VIEW OF CONDITIONS ON THE GROUND OVER THE CHANGING MISSION. BEYOND THE COLLECTED STORIES ON SUBJECTS AS VARIED AS OPERATION MEDUSA TO THE COUNTER-IED TASK FORCE, THE BOOK CONTAINS LOTS OF NEW INFORMATION, INCLUDING A FULL-TRANSCRIPT OF AN INTERVIEW WITH BRIGADIER-GENERAL DAVID FRASER, THE OVERALL COMMANDER FOR OPERATION MEDUSA AND THE TOP CANADIAN SOLDIER ON THE GROUND DURING THE CANADIAN MOVE TO KANDAHAR PROVINCE AND THE TALIBAN'S VICIOUS RESURGENCE IN 2005 / 2006

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